Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs

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Spirituality and spiritual development have been conspicuously absent from student development theories and ignored by many student affairs professionals. The authors argue for consideration of spiritual development by student development theorists, provide a definition and framework through which to consider spirituality and spiritual development, examine Maslow's (1971) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) work through a spiritual lens, and suggest directions for future practice and research.

Spirituality and spiritual development are topics that do not appear very often in higher education and student affairs literature. In fact, only one short essay addressing spirituality or spiritual development (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobsen, 1987) has appeared in any of the major student affairs journals (i.e., Journal of College Student Development, The NASPA Journal, College Student Affairs Journal, and College Student Journal) in the past 15 years. Reluctance to address spirituality in the field of student affairs is neither surprising nor unusual given the context in which it exists: higher education. One reason for this reluctance is that spirituality is often associated with religion and is, therefore, an uncomfortable topic to discuss in society (Bolman & Deal, 1995) and on college campuses (Collins...
et al., 1987). Cultural norms in the United States dictate that issues related to religion or spirituality are private matters (Collins et al., 1987). This is most evident in the constitutional mandate for "separation of church and state" so often championed by politicians, educators, and others, and of such a concern on public college campuses (Moberg, 1971). Beyond cultural norms, the Western paradigm of empirical, positivistic, objective, "value-free" knowledge so cherished in traditional academia had no room for issues of faith, hope, and love (Palmer, 1993). Academe, however, is moving increasingly toward a postmodern perspective in which values, assumptions, and beliefs play a central role in the social sciences (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). With this in mind, student affairs professionals must understand the role that such values as faith, hope, and love play in the structure and persistence of communities, in the construction of knowledge, in the understanding of truth, and in developmental processes of students.

The purpose of this article is to provide information about the intentional inclusion of spirituality and spiritual development in the discourse of the student affairs field and the area of student development. The article begins by providing a rationale for the inclusion of spirituality and spiritual development in the scholarship of student affairs. Propositions are then provided as a basis for a definition and conceptual framework of spiritual development. Finally, the spiritual aspects of two student development theories are discussed and a course for future practice and research is suggested.

Why Spirituality and Spiritual Development?

There are several reasons for including spirituality in the discourse and scholarship of the student affairs profession. The first is based on a very traditional and closely held assumption of the profession: the value of holistic student development (American Council for Education, 1937; 1949). By failing to address students' spiritual development in practice and research we are ignoring an important aspect of their development. Another reason is that these concepts are being addressed in other related helping professions and in academic disciplines that have traditionally informed our practice, such as psychology (Ferrucci, 1982; Helminiak, 1996; Tart, 1990), health (Allen & Yarian, 1981; Banks, 1980), social work (Canda, 1988; Sermabeikian, 1994), counseling (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Hinterkoff, 1994; Ingersoll, 1994; Maher & Hunt, 1993), nursing (Henderson, 1989; Krohn, 1989; Piles, 1990; Sims, 1977), and teaching and learning (Benally, 1994; Farber, 1995; Palmer, 1993). This widening discussion not only signals a challenge to the cultural assumption that spirituality is a taboo topic in academe, but also provides an interdisciplinary foundation of knowledge upon which a definition of
spiritual development can be devised. There also continues to be a surge in the quest for spiritual or religious fulfillment both within society and among traditional-aged college students. This trend is evident in the increasing emphasis on community service and service learning (Jacoby, 1996; Lankard, 1995), the rise of new age spirituality (Walz-Michaels, 1996), the growing emphasis on servant-leadership (Fraker & Spears, 1996), and the continued attraction to cults and cult-like groups (Blunt, 1992).

A void has existed on campus and in academe related to spirituality and spiritual development. There are few places to talk about these topics other than religious studies programs and campus ministry offices, which can be narrow avenues for discussing issues of spirituality. Traditional-aged college students often experience a period of displacement, confusion, and discomfort as they develop cognitively and emotionally. During this time, students may be attracted to traditional and fundamentalist religions, cults, and cult-like groups that promise definitive answers, especially in this area of spirituality and spiritual development. For many educators and student affairs professionals, the fear is that these groups require, often vehemently, a convergence of thoughts and beliefs from their followers. This expectation necessarily works against values such as free inquiry, exploration, and questioning. However, during a period of time when students struggle to make meaning in and of their lives, they will seek support and stability. Unfortunately, the profession's failure to engage in discussions of spirituality and spiritual development may contribute not only to foreclosure on matters of spirituality, but also to a general narrowness of perspective and an inability or unwillingness to think critically, explore value-related issues, and question authorities.

**Toward a Definition of Spiritual Development**

There is no commonly accepted definition of spirituality. Ingersoll (1994) noted that others have described it as communication with God (e.g., Fox, 1983), a movement towards union with God (e.g., McGill & McGreal, 1988), a focus on ultimate concerns and meanings of life (e.g., Tillich, 1959), and belief in a force greater than oneself (e.g., Booth, 1992; Wittmer, 1989). In trying to define spirituality, others have introduced concepts and language that focus on a particular outcome or state of being (Hawks, 1994), or on the process of spiritual development (Chandler et al., 1992). Still others have grounded aspects of spiritual development in traditional student development theory. For example, Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development are based in part on Perry's (1970) stages of intellectual development. In our efforts to incorporate spirituality into the discussion of student development in higher education, we have developed a set
of propositions that can guide discussion in the field and provide a framework through which to research the topic.

Several assumptions underlie the propositions we describe. First, the quest for spiritual development is an innate aspect of human development (Chandler et al., 1992), though one "cannot cause experiences of a spiritual nature to occur; one can only create certain conditions in which spiritual experiences are more likely to occur" (Chandler et al., 1992, p. 169). Also, while innate, motivations toward spirituality can be repressed (Haronian, 1972). Second, spiritual development and spirituality are interchangeable concepts in that both represent a process (i.e., movement, interaction, transcendence) with no endpoint.

A third assumption is that openness is a prerequisite to spiritual development. Chandler et al. (1992) describe a balanced openness. Optimal openness exists between the extremes of repressing spiritual elements in one's life (being closed to spiritual experiences or spiritual aspects of experiences) and being obsessed by spiritual experiences. Being open to spiritual development need not be conscious, intentional, or defined as openness to spiritual development. In fact, Helminiak (1996) argued that a dynamic openness of spirit is behind human curiosity and longing and is, therefore, the root of ongoing development in human beings. Openness to spiritual development can include being in awe of one's surroundings, having a sense of wonder about the world, being receptive to the as yet unexplained, being alert and sensitive to changes in one's relationships, or being curious as to the root of our emotions.

The propositions listed below acknowledge a wide range of belief systems that may or may not incorporate organized religions. Some of the components cited in these propositions, such as spiritual development's focus on connectedness to self and others, transceding loci of centricity, and deriving meaning, are aspects of traditional psychosocial and cognitive development theory. This relates to the contention that spiritual development is an important and integral aspect of students' development. These five propositions are not stages, nor are they listed in a linear, chronological order. They are processes that are interrelated and often are in evidence concurrently.

1. *Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.*

Seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness involves the process of developing a sense of self that is unitary (as opposed to fragmented), consistent, congruent with our actions and beliefs, and true to our sense of self. This process can be motivated
by the unrest or dissatisfaction individuals feel when their sense of values and meaning are not clear or not congruent with the way they live their lives. Benner (1988) describes the pursuit of authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as “the response to a deep and mysterious human yearning” (p. 104). This unsettled feeling encourages individuals to be introspective about their lives and the conditions under which they have chosen to exist. This self-examination, in many ways, is inevitable developmentally as individuals struggle with identity issues—and questions of who they are.

2. *Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity.*

To transcend means to go beyond one’s current limits. Leean (1984) describes spiritual development as the ongoing process of learning and growing through life’s challenges in the direction of self-transcendence. According to Maslow (1971), “transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness” (p. 269). Helminiak (1996) describes the transcendent dimension of spirituality as being aware of something beyond the spatial-temporal world.

When discussing “locus of centricity,” Chandler et al. (1992) differentiate among an unhealthy egocentricity (self-centered and narcissistic), a healthy egocentricity (enlightened self-interest), humanocentricity (centered in humanity), geocentricity (centered in the planet), and cosmocentricity (centered in the cosmos). Certainly, between egocentricity and humanocentricity there exist other levels of centeredness related to the communities we experience and of which we are a part, such as family, neighborhood, school, and church. Within each of these communities there can be various levels, such as nuclear family and extended family.

3. *Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.*

“Spirituality is personal [and] intimate. . . . All human existence has a spiritual aspect” (Jones, Wainwright & Yarnold, 1986, pp. xxiv, xxvi), yet spirituality is also rooted in connectedness, relationship, communion, and community with the spirit, and the sense of spirit that often exists in true communities (Fowler, 1981). Bolman and Deal (1995) address the issue of “community” in relationship to spirit:

Historically, humans have found meaning in work, family, community, and shared faith. They have drawn upon collective resources to do what they could not do alone. United efforts—raising a barn, shoring a levee, rescuing earthquake victims, or singing a hymn—have brought people together, created enduring bonds, and exem-
plified the possibilities of collective spirit. (p. 6)

The paradox of spirituality is that its experience is personal and unique, but only finds its fullest manifestation in the context of an ever broadening, mutually supportive community (Helminiak, 1996). Community also relates to the notion of increased knowledge and love, the contents of spiritual development. Palmer (1993) asserts that knowledge is love; however, he also indicates that:

Scholars now understand that knowing is a profoundly communal act. Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature. In order to know something, we depend on the consensus of the community—a consensus so deep that we often draw upon it unconsciously. (p. xv)

4. Spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.

Canda (1989) refers to spirituality as the basic human drive for meaning and purpose. The content of spirituality and the focus of the process of spiritual development is greater knowledge and greater love (Chandler et al., 1992); it is knowledge and love that help provide meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life. Helminiak (1996) describes the directionality of spiritual development:

The . . . openness of spirit is oriented in a particular direction. The ideal goal of spirit is being, all that there is to be known (and loved). So the openness of spirit entails a movement toward that all . . . Spirit’s nature is continually to move, to reassess, to rework, until it attains its ultimate goal, the complete and coherent appropriation of all reality. This dynamism of spirit is behind the unending curiosity and insatiable longings of the human heart. This dynamism is at the root of ongoing development in human beings. (p. 68)

In these postmodern times, knowledge relates not only to a greater worldview (Chandler et al., 1992), but to the recognition of the role of power, values, and assumptions on the fabrics of our communities. Benally (1994) explains that knowledge is spiritual according to the Navajo philosophy of learning and pedagogy. The purpose of gathering knowledge, which must be internalized as guiding principles for life, is to “draw one closer to a state of happiness, harmony, and balance” (p. 30). In the context of spirituality, love refers to the Greek notion of agape. Agape is the unselshf love of one person for another, a love that reaches out to others without expectation of return. It is the “acceptance of what is, and a motivation to bring about change that results in the greater good. Together with greater knowledge, this implies an evolving sense of life purpose with its increasingly comprehensive and constructive systems of ethics and values” (Chandler et al., 1992, p. 169). It is a “growth
in good will toward one’s fellows” (Jones et al., 1986, p. 565). Love provides direction for the process of spiritual development and for the spiritually developed person. Most of our cognitive development theories focus on the process of meaning making; spirituality gives focus and direction to those processes and a context in which to apply one’s love, increasing knowledge, and advanced cognitive skills.

5. Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

Spirituality also relates to the relationship with and openness to the influence of forces that exist beyond oneself (Opatz, 1986). Related to transcendence, as one develops spiritually there is a growing recognition of a spirit or force larger than oneself; a force accessible only through faith, hope, love, and other nonrational aspects of human experience. This spirit is often referred to—especially in Western tradition and religions—as God, but its experience and definition has varied throughout time and across cultures. For example, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are profoundly spiritual traditions, yet make no reference to God.

Kennedy (1997) cites Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders’ (1988) description of individuals who are at advanced levels of spiritual development:

These individuals . . . know that there is more than what they can see and that it is important to stay in touch with this other world. Spiritual individuals know that life has meaning and that there is a purpose to their lives. They have a sense that they need to accomplish a mission or fulfill a destiny in their lives. Spiritual individuals believe that all life is sacred. They can find wonder in even ordinary things. . . . Spiritual individuals are aware of the tragedies of life. While this gives their lives a serious side, it also makes them see their lives as more valuable. Spiritual individuals have evidence of spirituality in their lives. Their spirituality will affect their relationships with themselves and with everyone and everything around them. (p. 7–8)

Taken together the five propositions describe spiritual development as an interrelated process of seeking self-knowledge and centeredness, transcending one’s current locus of centricity, being open to and embracing community, recognizing an essence or pervasive power beyond human existence, and having that sense of spirit pervade one’s life.
Spirituality and Student Development Theory

In order to substantiate the assertion that spiritual development needs to be considered by student development theoreticians and practitioners, the work of psychosocial theorists Maslow (1971) and Chickering and Reisser (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) is examined to highlight spiritual elements already present in traditional student development theory. This examination provides support to the suggestion that introducing spirituality to the discussion and research of student development is not as big a leap as some might assume.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In Maslow's (1971) hierarchy of needs the pinnacle of development is self-actualization. What is rarely mentioned is that Maslow differentiated between "mere" self-actualization and self-actualization that is self-transcendent. In his work, he appeared to use the terms self-transcendence and spirituality synonymously. Maslow also identified non-self-actualized individuals who had transcendent experiences, proposing that spirituality is evident throughout the developmental process. In fact, human development is incomplete without consideration of spiritual development:

The spiritual life is . . . part of the human essence. It is a defining characteristic of human nature, without which human nature is not full human nature. It is part of the Real Self, of one's identity, of one's inner core, of one's specieshood, of full humanness. (p. 314)

Maslow addressed issues that have since come to be known as postmodern—rejection of the concept of "value-free" knowledge, the inability to "objectively" study and know something, and the critical importance of examining subconscious culture—and linked these to spiritual development.

The value life and the animal life are not in two separate realms as most religions and philosophies have assumed, and as classical, impersonal science has assumed. The spiritual life . . . is within the jurisdiction of human thought and is attainable in principle by man's own efforts. . . . Let me also make quite explicit the implication that metamotivation is species-wide, and is, therefore, supracultural, common-human, not created arbitrarily by culture. . . . Culture is definitely and absolutely needed for their actualization; but also culture can fail to actualize them, and indeed this is just what most known cultures actually seem to do. . . . Therefore, there is implied here a supracultural factor which can criticize any culture from outside and above that culture, namely, in terms
of the degree to which it fosters or suppresses self-actualization.
(p. 314–15)

Therefore, spiritual development, like student development, can either be fostered or inhibited by the environmental context in which students live, grow, and develop. Maslow (1971) also spoke to the intentional development of the spiritual elements of the human experience. Ultimately, Maslow argued for an integration of spiritual development practices into other aspects of our work focused on learning and development.

Chickering and Reisser’s Vectors

Within the vector of “Developing Integrity,” Chickering and Reisser (1993) presented three interrelated aspects: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. Much of the discussion of humanizing values in Education and Identity focused on issues and experiences related to religion and church. Again, it is important to distinguish between spiritual development and religious values, beliefs, and behaviors. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that most of the research done in the area of religious attitude change fell into two categories: general religiosity and religious activities. Most studies in the past 30 years have shown significant declines in religious attitudes, values, and behaviors. However, the specific practices often addressed are church attendance, prayer, grace before meals, identification with a particular religious denomination, and beliefs in a supreme being. While some of these, it may be argued, relate to rejection of spirituality, most do not address issues of spirituality at all; they are merely external measures or practices associated with religion.

On the other hand, changes in students identified in the literature of the past 30 years not often associated with religion, but congruent with the propositions related to spirituality and spiritual development, include a movement toward greater altruism, humanitarianism, and social conscience, more social, racial, ethnic, and political tolerance, greater support for the rights of individuals and for gender equality, and increasing openness and other-person orientation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Each of these changes can be argued as being at least somewhat spiritual in nature.

Viewed from the lens of spirituality, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) notion of humanizing values takes on a distinctly spiritual tone:

In the earlier developmental stages, moral rules and religious teachings are interpreted literally. But if the stories are seen to contradict each other or if the teachings contradict life experience, literalism breaks down. New teachers may be found, but sooner
or later, interpreters are bound to differ. As students deal with tensions between ancient traditions and new ideas, conformity and questioning, guilt and freedom, self-interest and unselfishness, they slowly recognize the need to take responsibility for defining their own positions, to commit to beliefs that ring true to their deepest selves, while remaining open and tolerant. (pp. 240–241)

This description reflects the propositions presented earlier in that spirituality, while developed within a community or tradition, is, ultimately, personal and idiosyncratic; it is a process, and it is punctuated by crises.

Only these two brief examples of developmental theories have been viewed through a spiritual lens. In this case, they were both psychosocial theories. Certainly, additional insights can be gained by examining the work of moral development theorists, such as Kohlberg (1971) and Gilligan (1982), as well as the work of other cognitive-structural theorists, through a spiritual lens. But beyond the examination of current theory, there is the need to explore the spiritual development of college students as a primary focus.

Continuing the Exploration

The challenges of studying spirituality from a scholarly perspective are many. As Collins et al. (1987) point out,

Spirituality does not lend itself to scientific study alone. . . . Spirituality requires different methods of consideration and investigation than those used through scientific approaches in most subject areas. Spirituality rests on the balance of faith and experience, on both revelation and reason. Openness to traditional and nontraditional approaches to investigation and understanding must be considered. (p. 275)

The time has come when nontraditional approaches to the study of spirituality and spiritual development among college students is warranted. Qualitative research has moved from the periphery of social science methodologies to acceptance as a legitimate form of research.

Assumptions related to the epigenetic nature of development (Erickson, 1968) may be another obstacle to the study of spirituality. While a “ground plan” may be somewhat genetically predetermined for cognitive development and while mainstream and middle-class societal influences may affect the relative similarity of psychosocial and identity development among college students, perhaps the variations in students' spiritual
experiences make it difficult to develop parsimonious theories of spiritual development. Another possible challenge to the study of spiritual development among college students is related to the nature of the college experience for traditional-aged students (especially those living at college). With its movement away from family and community of origin, its challenges to previous ways of thinking and believing, and its assault on a variety of "authorities," going away to college may be experienced as a form of spiritual emergency or crisis, a time when "one is overwhelmed or preoccupied with spirituality" (Chandler et al., 1992, p. 170). While spiritual emergencies, due to their overwhelming nature, often cause a temporizing of spiritual development, they do provide the grist for future development.

Jones et al. (1986) argue that "spiritual development is no steady, regular advance, but is punctuated by crises in which growth appears to have come to a stop for a time; old battles have to be refought and old experiences relived at a deeper level" (p. 566). As evidenced by Chicken-ing and Reisser's (1993) description of the crises faced by college students as they struggle to develop integrity, college may be a time when for some traditional-aged students growth in spirituality may appear stopped, a time when beliefs need to be reexamined and prior experiences relived. The challenges to their current spirituality may be overwhelming. Therefore, in the case of some traditional-aged college students, spiritual development may temporize and appear to be not occurring at all or even regressing. Frankly, we just do not know, because we have not looked at students' experiences through the lenses of spirituality and spiritual development.

Implications for Practitioners

Despite the relative lack of knowledge or understanding of, as well as the potential discomfort with, college students' spiritual development and the research that needs to be done, there are practical implications from the information presented. These implications relate to incorporating the recognition of spirituality into interactions with students:

1. Student affairs professionals need to reflect on their own spiritual development. This means considering how they derive meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives, how they are growing in connectedness with self and others, and how they are or are not growing toward a greater openness to a relationship with an intangible and pervasive essence beyond human existence and rational knowing.

2. Student affairs professionals must be open to issues of spiritual development in students. This may mean looking beyond issues of
religion and differentiating between religion and spirituality. It may also entail the recognition of religion as a manifestation of students' search for spirituality.

3. Student affairs professionals must recognize that emotional crises in a student's life may have a spiritual element or, in fact, may be a spiritual emergency or crisis. Failure to recognize this possibility may result in misdirected advice or counseling, or a misdirected referral.

4. Student affairs professionals need information and training related to spirituality and spiritual development. Until spiritual development is incorporated into the canon of student development theory, it may be up to professional organizations to encourage this information dissemination through workshops and conference programs.

**Implications for Researchers**

The propositions have been structured in such a way as to encourage and focus research on the spiritual development of college students and can be viewed as a starting point. Additional questions to aid in this exploration include

What is the relationship between spiritual development and the role of spirituality in development?

What are the processes of spiritual development?

Can spirituality be intentionally developed?

How is spiritual development similar or distinct from faith development, cognitive development, moral development, or psychosocial development? How do these interact?

Can a student reach a higher level of cognitive, moral, or psychosocial development without having developed somewhat spiritually?

**Conclusion**

This article, like that of Collins et al. (1987) over 10 years ago, represents a call for a focus on the exploration of students' spiritual development. At a time when college students are faced with more challenges than ever before, continuing to neglect this aspect of development makes us
less effective as educators. As a profession, however, we need to know much more about spiritual development. This promises to be a rich and valuable exploration.

References


