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Faith Development and Student Affairs

by Barry Loy

INTRODUCTION

As I sit in my office pondering the topic “Faith Development and Student Affairs”, I’ve surrounded myself with a supply of helpful resources spread about the room. In one corner I have the seminal works on faith development by James Fowler (Fowler, 1981) and Sharon Daloz Parks (Parks, 1986). In another corner I have the “Fabric of Faithfulness” (Garber, 1996), “The Abandoned Generation” (Willimon and Naylor, 1995), and “Shaping Character” (Holmes, 1991). In yet another corner I have “Evangelicalism: the Coming Generation” (Hunter, 1987) and “Evangelicalism: The Next Generation” (Penning and Smidt, 2002). In a far corner I have a small pile of “faith development” articles from the NASPA Journal and the Journal of College Student Development. Closer to me I have a thin collection of works produced by members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) and the Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD). In the center of my office I have the Holy Bible.

So, here I am, on a holiday weekend, trying to put into words something that might be helpful as we, the members of the Association for Christians in Student Development, seek to help our students “weave together belief and behavior during the university years” (Garber, 1996).

As I look back on my professional life, what once seemed so simple now seems so complex. Let me explain. Thirty years ago as a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, God had entrusted to me a remedy for all the ills of my fellow students. That remedy was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The process was simple--share the “good news” with unbelievers. It was their only hope for an abundant life in this world and the world beyond. Once they receive Christ as Savior, provide them with opportunities for growth and nurture. Teach them how to pray, fellowship, study God’s Word and witness to others, all the while pointing to Christ as Lord. By God’s grace, I saw many students transformed and I witnessed in the span of a few years much “faith development” in the context of a university setting. For me, the important ingredients of this experience consisted of a shared faith in Christ, discipleship, outreach, and

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Christian fellowship. Years later, Steve Garber (Garber, 1996), with much eloquence and depth, defined these elements more precisely and thoroughly. Garber states:

"It is those who develop a worldview that can address the challenge of coherence and truth in a pluralist society, who find a relationship with a mentor who incarnates that worldview, and who choose to live their lives among others whose common life is an embodiment of that worldview who continue on with integrity into adulthood" (Garber, 1996).

And isn't that our ultimate goal as we work with students? That their faith would grow with integrity as they move further and further into adulthood. So, what is so complicated? If we are faithful to our calling, the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of men and women, and we are able to observe the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The complexity becomes more obvious the longer we work with students, and it is also defined by where we work. Some of our ACSD members work in non-faith based institutions, while the majority of us work in colleges and universities that have "faith development" (e.g. evangelical Christianity) at the center of all that we say and hope to do. Below I will attempt to describe the challenge of faith development within the academy for those of us who seek to know Christ and make Him known in and through our work as student affairs professionals.

The Status of faith development and spiritual formation in the broader arena of student affairs

Most of us are well acquainted with the importance of the Christian faith in the early colleges in this country. From the beginning of the colonial colleges through the mid-nineteenth century, higher education and spiritual formation were synonymous.

"During this period of higher education, educating the mind was not distinct from nurturing the spirit. Intellectual growth was not properly achieved without a concomitant cultivation of the spiritual life." (Loy and Painter, 1997)

Over the decades this happy marriage between faith and learning slowly eroded in the majority of colleges and universities despite the religious values of many of the early student affairs practitioners. Nonetheless, even as late as 1937, the *Student Personnel Point of View* advocated wholistic development that included "moral and religious values" (Naspa, 1989). However, by the mid-1970s, human development and self-actualization theories focusing on the unlimited potential for human development became the guiding principle for student development work. Discussions of human development in the larger academy were almost always void of references to "faith development". The works of Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986) did receive some notice, but it wasn't until the end of the 1990s that journal articles dealing with faith



development from the major professional associations started to appear on a more regular basis in national publications. According to Love (1999), only one short essay on spiritual development had appeared in a major student affairs journal in a 15-year period. Below I have listed the titles of several articles appearing from 1998 to 2002.

Religion on Campus: Suggestions for Cooperation between Student Affairs and Campus-Based Religious Organizations (Temkins and Evans 1998)

Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs (Love and Talbot, 1999)

Purpose in Life, Student Development, and Well-Being: Recommendations for Student Affairs Practitioners (Moran, 2001)

Comparing Spiritual Development and Cognitive Development (Love, 2002)

Changing Worlds, Changing Selves: The Experience of the Religious Self Among Catholic Collegians (Lee, 2002)

The Role of Faith in the Development of an Integrated Identity: A Qualitative Study of Black Students at a White College (Stewart, 2002)

Religious Participation, Spirituality, and Coping Among African American College Students (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, Lewis, 2002)

I believe this increase in publications suggests an openness to “spiritual formation” that until recently did not exist in our profession outside of faith based schools. Other evidence of a renewed interest in faith development by the larger academy includes the publication in the New Directions for Student Services Series of “*The Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice*” (Jablonski, 2001) and the recent release of “*Religion on Campus*” (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield, 2001). Also, the recent NASPA workshop, *Spirituality on Campus: Reflection and Practice*, held in New Orleans gives more credence to the view that student affairs as a profession is giving more attention to the faith development of college students.

I should also mention the work of the Institute on College Student Values (ICSV). ICSV has been promoting the character development of college students through its annual conference since 1991. ICSV has focused more on civic education and ethical issues while the recent developments in the larger profession are more centered on religious and spiritual elements of the college student’s experience.

It is a new day in the broader profession when student affairs professionals are encouraged to consider the spiritual dimension of its students. Why the change? Until recently, the larger, more influential student affairs organizations have been reluctant to deal with the spiritual dimension of college students. Perhaps our culture’s movement

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into post modernity (a time when ways of thinking about ultimate questions are not limited to reason and science) has fueled the growing interest in God and religion as a valid focus of college student development.

Implications for Christians working in non-faith based institutions.

The truth is that humans have a tendency to “make meaning” about their existence. According to Moers (1992), Parks describes faith as the activity of composing and being recomposed by meaning. This is part of being created in the image of God. College students, in Christian and non-Christian institutions, tend to ask “ultimate questions”. And what are these basic questions? As reported by Hughes (2001), Paul Tillich offered these three basic questions as examples.

- *How can I cope with the inevitability of death?*
- *Am I an acceptable human being?*
- *Is there any meaning in life, and if there is, what is it?*

Hughes (2001) goes on to say that

“getting our students to reflect on the meaning of their finitude, the meaning of their estrangement, and the meaning of their inevitable deaths is absolutely crucial to the task of Christian higher education”.

While agreeing with Hughes, I would say it a bit differently. Reflection on these issues is absolutely crucial to the task of being a good student affairs professional - in a Christ-centered institution or a “secular” one.

So, for the Christian working in a non-faith-based college or institution, what are the benefits of this turn by the larger student affairs profession toward the importance of spiritual development? I believe that it opens the door for Christians to legitimately deal with the ultimate questions about life, albeit from a pluralistic point of view. What was once totally off limits or at least delegated solely to the department of religious affairs, is now fair game for the Christian serving in a wide variety of contexts within student affairs. This topic would make for an interesting discussion group and workshop at the annual ACS D conference. Perhaps the leadership of ACS D would go a step further and consider sponsoring a special institute or think tank to help those working in this setting to explore ways to take advantage of this openness.

Faith Based colleges and universities

At first glance, it would seem as though Christian student affairs professionals working in Christ-centered colleges have a simple task when it comes to faith development. In many ways this is true. Our mission statements and philosophy of education allow us to recognize Christ as pre-eminent in all things having to do with learning. Most of our students enter our colleges desiring to grow as Christians and to learn from



Christian faculty and staff. In fact, the findings of the CCCU Collaborative Research project funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) give us reason to be encouraged regarding the spiritual development of students at CCCU colleges and universities. In *FIPSE Through the Eyes of Student Affairs*, Guthrie and Opitz, (1999) say,

“Based on these data, it appears that things are good on CCCU campuses. Seniors consider developing a meaningful philosophy of life very important and their relationship with God as enmeshed with how they live day-to-day. Moreover, CCCU alumni seem to value these things even more. Something about the ministry efforts of student affairs staff and faculty alike must be working.”

However, even given this interest in spiritual formation, those of us working within Christian higher education are well aware that all is not bliss. Perhaps not at the same degree as the rest of the academy, but at significant levels, our students are struggling with alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity. Likewise, our students are dealing with an array of emotional and personal problems including eating disorders, depression, sexual addictions, sexual abuse, and so on. What about my simple remedy from my college days for all the ills of college students? Doesn't the good news of Jesus Christ deliver our students from these human problems? The answer is yes and no. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. Jesus Christ is sufficient for all believers but His sufficiency does not remove all of the affects of the Fall at least not for now. All the more reason that we should be concerned about faith development in Christ-centered colleges.

In the early eighties, James Davidson Hunter alarmed the trustees and administrators of Christian Colleges with the publication of “Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation” (Hunter, 1987). Based on his research, Dr. Hunter suggested that students in Christian Colleges were becoming less orthodox in their views about salvation, the inerrancy of Scripture and evangelical behavioral norms. More alarming were his questions regarding the role of evangelical higher education in the liberalizing of these beliefs and behaviors. In an interview in *Christianity Today*, he said the following:

“The more it {Christian Higher Education} is committed to genuine intellectual inquiry, where everything is open for examination--as opposed to indoctrination--there will be certain kinds of “contaminating” effects. (Neff and Spring, 1987)

Later in the *Christianity Today* interview, Hunter went on to surmise that Christian students at secular campuses were less susceptible to the undermining influencing of higher education because of their “fortress” mentality. Whereas students on Christian campuses let their guard down because they consider their campuses safe, allowing “secular” ideas to more easily creep into their ways of thinking (1987). If Hunter is correct on this point, those of us working on Christian campuses may have a more complex task than we initially thought.





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Almost twenty years later as a follow up to Hunter's research, Penning and Smidt (2002) replicated the study using a nearly identical survey and with evangelical students from the same nine evangelical colleges used by Hunter in 1982. Overall, the findings of Penning and Smidt do not show erosion of the evangelical beliefs of those attending Christian Colleges.

"These data, therefore, provide no evidence of a secularizing influence on evangelical college campuses at least in terms of agreement with historic tenets of the Christian faith." (Penning and Smidt, 2002) Penning and Smidt (2001) also found that evangelical college students exhibit high levels of religious practice (e.g. praying daily, attending church, daily Bible reading, and witnessing).

Before we allow ourselves to breathe a sigh of relief, we should remind ourselves that right behavior doesn't necessarily follow correct biblical knowledge and pious conduct. How do we measure "faith development" or "spiritual maturity"? The work of Penning and Smidt seems to say that our students believe the "right things" and "practice spiritual disciplines" but what about their behavior? And when I say *behavior*, I mean far more than whether or not they smoke or drink. Penning and Smidt (2002) also reported that evangelical college students believe that the church should focus more on personal morality (54 percent) and less on social justice (12 percent). Do our students value what God values love, obedience, sacrifice, justice, and eradicating oppression and poverty? How do we help our students move from right beliefs to right behavior? How do we help them connect knowing with being and doing?

In Isaiah 58, we have an example of a community, the Israelites, who seem to have correct knowledge about God and even take part in religious activities (e.g. prayer and fasting) but do not show evidence of loving the things that God loves (e.g. feeding the hungry, loosing the bonds of injustice and oppression and clothing the poor). How do we help our students follow the greatest commandment to love God (Matthew 22: 36-40) and to realize that loving God equals caring for the needs of others (1 John 3: 16, 17 and 1 John 4:20). As we are so vividly reminded by the passage in Matthew 25 on the sheep and goats, faith is ultimately measured by what we do for "one of the least of these". Calling Jesus Lord is not enough. Having the right evangelical beliefs is not enough. Having a daily quiet time is not enough. How do we teach ourselves and our students that loving the "least of these" through acts of sacrifice is the way we truly love the Lord our God?

The answer that I have most often heard to this question tends to have something to do with mentoring. In the old days, thirty years ago when I worked in a university setting, the answer was discipleship, with discipleship being defined as a close personal relationship that included teaching younger Christians spiritual disciplines through example and training. People like Robert Coleman (author of the *Master Plan of Evangelism* (1964)) and followers of Dawson Troutman (founder of the Navigators) touted the importance of working one on one in close disciplining relationships.





According to many, especially Garber (1996) and Parks (2000), mentoring is the primary catalyst for spiritual development. Parks (1986) believes that “because faith must be embodied, religious people must reveal the power of their Story and Vision in the forms of their common everyday life.” How are we doing at embodying our faith? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Are we dwelling among our students (e.g. spending time listening and challenging them)? How are we doing with mentoring? How many of your students have a mentor in the traditional sense of the word - someone close that embodies the Christian faith? Do they have to have a traditional mentor, or will sporadic contact with a faculty member, staff, or administrator who embodies the “faith” be enough?

I would like to close my thoughts with a number of questions and ideas for further reflection, deliberation, and action. My hope is that we will all press forward to gain a greater understanding of what mature faith looks like and how we might foster it within the academy.

Questions and suggestions

- What do we in ACSD have to offer to the larger profession regarding spiritual formation? Are we at the table, or do we let our “particularity” (e.g. Our belief that Jesus is the only way to God) prevent us from dialoging in a broader fashion with the rest of our profession? Sharon Daloz Parks is an example to us. Not only is she a keynote speaker at the upcoming ACSD conference in June 2003, she was also the speaker that NASPA scheduled for the recent conference on “Spirituality on Campus: Reflection and Practice”.
- Are ACSD members aware of the findings of the longitudinal study conducted by the CCCU - “Taking Values Seriously: Assessing the Mission of Church-Related Higher Education”. This FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) supported project began in 1994 with the purpose of evaluating and improving Christian Higher Education. It has produced many findings relevant to “faith development”.
- What about mentoring? Perhaps someone should gather the “Best Practices” in mentoring from around the country and make them available to ACSD members. It is painfully obvious that student affairs staff can’t mentor all the students. How do we mobilize other staff and faculty, given the heavy load of responsibilities they carry? What are other less time consuming ways of mentoring? And for those in Christian higher education, what are our institutions doing to insure the spiritual nurture of faculty and staff? We can’t embody something before our students if we don’t have it.
- What about chapel? Does it promote the faith development of this generation of college students? What about required chapel versus voluntary attendance?





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- How do off campus experiences (study abroad, short-term mission trips) impact faith development? Stephen Beers (2001) has conducted some important research in this area and has laid a good foundation for others to do future research on the connection of cross-cultural experiences and spiritual formation.
- What type of research is needed to see how well we are doing in Christian colleges to help our students connect their right beliefs about God with right behavior? It seems clear from Penning and Smidt (2002) that our students have “orthodox” evangelical beliefs. However, based on the comments I hear from my colleagues around the country, it appears that many of our students are struggling when it comes to “righteous behavior”. Even more importantly, what evidence do we have that our students are continuing to live out their faith with integrity as they move further into adulthood?
- How do we effectively measure faith development of college students? One example of a comprehensive instrument is the Faith Maturity Scale developed by Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1993). The FMS attempts to measure faith by examining beliefs, religious practices, and social justice behaviors. What other instruments are available? Are they adequate, especially when it comes to not only measuring beliefs, knowledge and religious practices but more importantly, measuring Christian behavior (e.g. involvement in social justice, righteous living, integrating faith with living, etc.)?

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