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Jeannine Kranzow  
*Azusa Pacific University*

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# Faith Integration: Curricular Considerations for Student Affairs Faculty

Jeannine Kranzow, Ph.D.

Azusa Pacific University

## Abstract

There is an expectation that faculty members teaching in Christian colleges will integrate the Christian faith into their disciplines. In spite of the willingness and desire to do so, many faculty members who attended secular institutions are not sure how to approach academic faith integration in their discipline. This qualitative study examines new and experienced faculty perspectives on courses and topics within the student affairs curriculum that provide opportunities for academic faith integration. Results can assist student affairs faculty members in their professional development as it relates to academic faith integration.

## Introduction

It is widely recognized that faculty members working in Christian institutions are generally expected to integrate faith and learning in the college classroom (Rasmussen, & Hernandez Rasmussen, 2005). This integration extends beyond courses in religion to all disciplines. For many faculty members who are educated in secular institutions, this concept of formally and intentionally integrating faith into the discipline is new (Beers & Beers, 2008). Part of the difficulty involved in becoming competent in academic faith integration (AFI) is the recognition that Christians and scholars are not in one accord as to what faith integration should look like (Jacobsen & Hustedt Jacobsen, 2004; Matthias, 2008; Ripley, Garzon, Lewis Hall, Mangis, & Murphy, 2009). An additional layer of complexity involved in understanding AFI pedagogy is that while all disciplines in faith-based institutions have the responsibility to participate in AFI, it takes on a different form within each discipline.

While literature on AFI as it relates to social work (Seitz, 2014), psychology (Grauf-grounds, Edwards, Macdonald, Mui-Teng Quek, & Schermer Sellers, 2009), marketing (Starcher, 2013), English as a second language (Lessard-Clouston, 2012), and many other disciplines is available to guide faculty members in their AFI, scholarly sources to guide those in the discipline of student affairs (SA) are largely absent. Student affairs faculty members who are new to AFI or those wishing to examine their integration at a deeper level presently have few resources available; therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify curricular areas in SA which faculty members feel are fruitful for AFI consideration and application. By identifying course content and application areas for AFI, faculty seeking to better understand or further develop their ability to do AFI will have material that the author hopes will be useful for teaching, reflection, and professional growth.

## Literature

As noted earlier, there is limited research on the topic of integrating faith and spirituality into SA programs (Love & Talbot, 2009). Present research addresses the broad topic of faith, religion, and spirituality as they relate to extending the development of students to the spiritual sphere (Astin, 2016; Love & Talbot, 2009; Smith, 2004). Estanek (2008) expands her focus to examine SA work in a Catholic context, making suggestions for transformative student experiences; however, her work is not focused on integrating faith into the professional preparation curriculum. Rather, much of her work examines ways that SA professionals can engage with students in ways that are in keeping with the Catholic mission specifically. A specific

literature gap exists in terms of integrating the Christian faith with the disciplinary pedagogy of student affairs professional preparation.

Faculty members preparing Christian educators for the field of SA must equip students to work in a variety of institutional contexts with significant variance in the institutional mission. There are role expectations for the profession and role expectations of the specific campus, and the two are not always in alignment, especially at faith-based institutions (Estanek, Herdlein, & Harris, 2011). Furthermore, at these institutions “faculty and staff hold to Christian faith beliefs amidst students, and even a profession, that may not share the same values” (Grauf-grounds et al., 2009, p. 4). AFI should engage the student mind and guide the student into meaningful consideration of how they can reconcile worldview perspectives, role expectations, and personal values (Hall, Ripley, Garzon, & Mangis, 2009).

AFI can be considered from three primary vantage points – curriculum, the role of the teacher, and scholarship (Bailey, 2012). While there is much opportunity to discuss integration in the discipline of student affairs from each of these perspectives, this research will focus on the curricular potential.

## Methodology

This research is part of a larger exploratory case study involving the AFI learning process for faculty members in student affairs. This smaller portion of the qualitative study focuses specifically on the curriculum in the discipline, and examines courses and topics which faculty believe are rich for faith integration discussions or activities. Three faculty members who teach in SA or higher education master’s programs at institutions in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities department as well as the author (also a faculty member in the discipline) responded to the following questions in an individual interview:

- What areas of opportunity for AFI do you see in the courses you teach?
- What, if any, opportunity do you see for AFI to happen across the curriculum at a broader (student affairs disciplinary) level?

All four participants have been through or were completing professional development sessions for new faculty on the topic of AFI. The length of time in a full-time faculty role ranged from one year to over 13 years. Faculty members taught some similar and a few different courses, providing insight into a range of AFI opportunities in the discipline.

Because responses pertained to very specific curricular questions, data analysis consisted of examining the responses and determining whether they related to overlapping/common curricular ideas or were unique to specific courses. In each case, content analysis allowed responses to be organized by themes, which will be highlighted in the Results section. In order to increase the validity of the study, member checking was conducted with two of the faculty members (not including the author). Participants were asked to consider whether their perspectives were captured accurately as well as if other ideas or thoughts had come to mind since the original interview. While member checking is not without criticism, it can serve as a way both to check for accurate interpretation of statements and also to provide a means for transformational practice (Koelsch, 2013). The author hoped that this member checking process would allow an opportunity for faculty to consider how this study may have affected their thoughts or behaviors on the topic of AFI. Since the present research is intended to be useful for reflection and support for those teaching in SA programs, this process for addressing validity was deemed appropriate.

### Findings

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The data illuminated four common areas in student affairs that are fruitful for discussions of AFI. These four areas were identified as natural intersections in every course within the professional preparation program. The data also revealed areas where further discussion and deeper learning might take place within a course-specific context. Taken together, these findings offer faculty in this discipline considerable opportunities for discussions of faith in the classroom.

### Points of Intersection & Integration Across the Curriculum

The four identified areas that appeared to be the best natural junctures for AFI in any course within student affairs professional preparation programs were: connecting faith, values, and beliefs to the profession including the concept of the whole person/holistic view of humanity; seeking excellence as a way to honor God; approaching leadership through a lens of faith; and examining the role of an institutional counselor or leader in light of social justice and diversity. Some might suggest that the final two categories should be combined. While this perspective is not without merit, considering them separately is helpful due to the emphasis that faculty placed on them as distinct areas and because of the nuances of the discussions in the interviews.

**Connecting faith, values, and beliefs with the profession and its goals.** This theme is the anchor of the AFI discussions in SA preparation

programs because although the range of content in SA programs is typically broad (topics from counseling foundations, law and ethics, and student development to administration and technology), consideration of the profession's values and core beliefs in each of these areas is essential. One of the professional competencies recognized by both the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), is to “connect the history, philosophy, and values of the student affairs profession to one's current professional practice” (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 12). It is a natural extension of this expectation to engage students in a conversation about how the Christian faith affects and influences their values and practice (Estanek et al., 2011).

One of the essential concepts in the field of SA is that of viewing students from a holistic perspective. Since AFI dictates that disciplinary content be examined in light of Biblical teachings (Beers & Beers, 2008), students can examine the stated philosophy of the discipline while also examining scripture. In addition, relevant denominational or institutional documents based on theological perspectives might be discussed. Asking students to integrate their faith and academic work in this way prepares them to be able to articulate how they will put their faith into practice.

Whether teaching about the origins of the field and foundational documents, discussing approaches to counseling, planning student learning opportunities, or examining theories of student development, identity development, spiritual, and moral development, faculty can engage students in discussions or thought-provoking assignments related to the impact on that particular topic in relation to the Christian idea of holistic personhood. Other values and beliefs ascribed to in the field and discussed in seminal documents such as the Student Personnel Point of View (1937) and the Student Learning Imperative (1994) provide further opportunities for students to examine their own values and consider ways that the Christian faith and beliefs are in alignment or discord with the philosophies of the field. These documents open the dialogue about how SA professionals see students and impress upon those new to the field the importance of including conversations about spiritual topics as an essential component of their work.

**Seeking excellence.** Another concept that came out of the interviews which is applicable across all areas of student affairs curriculum (in addition to other disciplines) is the idea of seeking excellence in everything as a way to honor God. This applies to individual courses, to programs broadly, and extends further as students prepare to enter the profession and examine their own work. The literature indicates that students correlate a faculty member's perceived striving for excellence with their ability to integrate their faith into

their practice (Matthias & Wrobbel, 2015). In SA courses, faculty members have AFI opportunities to discuss not only the perspective of doing excellent work, but also the responsibility to reflect on their own excellence and example. Student affairs professionals can reflect on the ways that their work is a model of leading and living in accordance with scripture and bringing honor and glory to God. If practitioners strive for excellence, students perceive this as authentic integration.

**Leadership.** As the student affairs profession trains those who will work in higher education in various capacities in roles of administration, teaching, and counseling, the topic of leadership is frequently discussed. Topics such as theories addressing perspectives on leadership to considerations for how and when to revise policies or budgets were mentioned as areas fruitful for AFI work. Using a Christian lens, faculty can ask students to consider questions such as: What does it look like to lead a unit on campus from a Christian leadership perspective? What does Christian supervision look like? What does “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5: 3, ESV) mean in terms of leading Christianly?

AFI in the context of leadership has almost unending potential. From examining current events in light of Christian administration and leadership (such as student athletes being accused of sexual assault) to case studies involving challenging scenarios (such as a racial incident during preview weekend), the wisdom of Jesus provides insight that is worthy of scholarly attention. Further, faculty members can help students examine leadership texts and articles for Biblical alignment or discrepancy. Students’ consideration of leadership texts and Christian leadership principles in the context of today’s higher education challenges is a practice that all faculty members have ample opportunities to encourage.

**Diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice.** The final common curricular area identified which offers plentiful occasions for AFI is that of diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice. Although many SA programs offer specific courses on diversity and multiculturalism (where further AFI can occur), the topic is too important, from both a Christian and a higher education perspective, to be relegated into a single term. As such, when faculty members teach any course, there are abundant opportunities to discuss how a Christian perspective affects the way Student Affairs professionals approach diversity and social justice in their field.

The Biblical perspective on diversity can be discussed in terms of God’s view of man and/or a picture of the coming kingdom. Scriptures such as “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NIV) and “...a great

multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes..." (Rev. 7:9, ESV) can provide opportunities to discuss how these ideas influence the philosophy and work of Christians in the field of student affairs. These scriptures also open the door to discussion about what professionals can do in their practice to advocate for social justice and diversity. For example, AFI discussions or assignments centered around the topic of admissions and financial aid policies could ask students to ponder such things as: How might a college display its commitment to diversity and access through its admissions and financial aid policies (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009)?

Beyond AFI opportunities that occur within the framework of a specific class topic, selected readings can support a commitment to diversity and social justice. Identification of readings from authors of various racial, gender, and ethnic backgrounds is something many faculty members put great effort into, but without discussion of that work as intentional AFI work, students may fail to see the connection between the faculty member's selection of texts and his/her commitment to diversity and Christian responsibility. Faculty members have an opportunity to discuss the reasons they do what they do so that students can see a commitment to diversity issues through their pedagogy.

#### Course-Specific Intersection and Integration in the Curriculum

The focus of the research findings now shifts beyond the four primary areas for consideration across the curriculum to the ways that faculty members mentioned intentional AFI in specific courses. While not all programs have the same courses, the content is generally in areas of administration, counseling, research, diversity, and student development. With this idea in mind, courses in each area will be discussed here with a mention of specific considerations for AFI efforts.

**Diversity and multiculturalism.** The topic of diversity was mentioned above in terms of its universal ability to link the Christian faith with course content in the field of student affairs. As a specific course, there are opportunities to look deeper and build on earlier learning in the area of diversity. Examining diversity from the perspectives of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion is important for students. One consideration for AFI is to examine the institutional position statement on diversity and discuss the ways in which the position is informed by scripture (Slavin Miller, n.d.). Another possibility is to discuss economic diversity from a Christian worldview and to consider, as Hughes (2005) challenges, the role Christians play in serving those who have less.

Through self-reflection and in community with others, students learn to more clearly recognize their privilege and the responsibility that Christians have to be a blessing to others. While a full description of the deep learning that takes place in this type of course in the professional preparation curriculum is beyond the scope of this writing, the central curricular concepts include examining privilege, entering into the discomfort that comes along with examining it, and processing those thoughts and feelings in light of the Christian faith. Practitioners in the field of student affairs are called to serve students from underprivileged and underrepresented backgrounds (Grier-Reed & Ganuza, 2012; Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt, 2013). Students of the profession must therefore consider deeply how they can serve the underprivileged and underrepresented Christianly.

**Vocation, calling, and work.** Another area of significant overlap of faith and academic discipline content had to do with the discussion of vocation and calling. One of the reasons that many students attend college is so they can find meaningful and financially gainful employment (Pryor et al., 2012), and college is a time when many students question their purpose and search for meaningful work (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). Student affairs programs either have courses in career counseling or integrate aspects of career counseling into their other courses as they discuss topics like academic advising, student success, and high-impact practices. In discussions of career and vocation, students can consider whether or how their own faith informs decisions about work and vocation. Further, because many of the students in SA programs will guide, support, or counsel students on career-related issues in their future work, those in career planning courses should examine how counseling can be considerate of the calling that others often seek (Adams, 2012). Students can also consider together in class (or individually in an assignment) how the Christian worldview overlaps or strays from the literature on career, calling and vocation.

**Theoretical courses.** Whether focused on student development, counseling theory, or leadership, courses with high theoretical content are rich with opportunities for AFI. Whenever theories are introduced, students have an opportunity to consider the theory's relationship to their own worldview. "Worldviews shape what is presented to you as fact" (Harris, 2004, p. V) and "theories are also laden with values and world-view assumptions about the nature of personhood, social relationships, and society" (Watson & Eveleigh, 2014, p. 200). Theories therefore offer organic opportunities for critical thinking about beliefs and ideologies, and student affairs faculty members noted these topics to be meaningful in preparing students for professional practice.

**Research courses.** At first glance, a course on research methods or statistics might seem more difficult in terms of AFI, yet these courses also offer natural linkages. Deep ethical questions lie in the midst of research. Perhaps closely aligned to seeking excellence in all that is done, giving consideration to what characterizes a Christian researcher is significant. From research topics selected to methods of data collection to reporting of findings and attributing credit as due, the research process is full of steps worth discussing in light of a Christian worldview.

The Chronicle of Higher Education and other major newspapers are often reporting breaches in ethical research protocol in the higher education community (Johnson, 2012; Kolowich, 2015). AFI discussions or reflective writing about standards of conduct in relation to ones of faith and worldview can flow out of topics related to current research happenings in various institutions.

**Courses addressing student conduct and discipline.** AFI allows student conduct to be examined from a Biblical perspective through lenses of grace, justice, reconciliation, and the impact of behavior on community. In many ways, this topic leads logically into a discussion of the gospel itself. “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20, NIV).

There may be multiple courses that have an opportunity to discuss student conduct, the bad choices that humans often make, and the impact of sin on the community. Courses introducing students to the functional areas in SA, student development courses, and legal and ethical issues courses have the potential to explore the topic of student discipline, policy, and concepts of faith, redemption, and restorative justice (Slavin Miller, n.d.). Since it is often student affairs educators interacting with students throughout the discipline process when violations of student codes of conduct arise, philosophies and approaches to student conduct work make for meaningful discussions about the intersection of faith and practice. From both a case study perspective and a philosophical perspective, AFI discussions of punitive versus developmental approaches to student violations of the code of conduct can be significant.

**Co-curricular planning and student affairs experiential learning.** In some ways, the topic of co-curricular programming could fall under the broad areas of connecting faith with the profession’s goals because the large majority of SA practitioners would identify co-curricular education as their primary role; however, there are specific opportunities for AFI in courses which focus on programming development and student learning. As students hone their abilities to develop programming, they must intentionally consider ways to foster student spiritual growth and development (Astin,

2016; Keeling, 2006). AFI allows students to consider and discuss the types and variety of programs that respond to the call of the field and align with institutional mission and Christian worldview.

## Discussion

This study identified topics and courses within the field of student affairs that serve as opportunities for AFI. Identifying intersections of disciplinary content and Biblical perspectives that are fertile for integration into work is one way to consider approaching faculty professional development within programs of SA in Christian institutions.

As faculty discussed points in the curriculum that make for organic linkages between student affairs content and Biblical teachings, it became apparent that the opportunities, while plentiful, tend to feel more natural in some areas than others. While all the areas discussed in the findings are possible junctures for AFI to occur, it is likely that individual faculty members will focus on specific areas that intersect with their research interests and experiences. Passion about one's discipline has shown to be significant in faculty faith integration in other disciplines (Matthias, 2008), and this appears true in the discipline of student affairs as well.

While this study focused on the curricular aspect of AFI, it seems important to emphasize two closing suggestions at this point. First, academic faith integration should focus on preparing the students to integrate their faith once they are in their future jobs (Bailey, 2012).

Too much focus on the instructor as expert denies the students opportunities to be responsible for their own AFI learning; therefore, students must be challenged, encouraged, and supported to do the difficult AFI work (Bailey, 2012). Second, AFI research highlights the importance of quality interactions and relationships with students (Burton & Nwosu, 2003; Sherr, Huff & Curran, 2007). In a multi-institutional, qualitative study, "students indicated that faculty who provided effective IFL [integration of faith and learning] in the classroom expressed sincere care and concern for all aspects of their lives – physical, emotional, and spiritual" (Sherr et al., 2007, p. 22). Faculty credibility as a scholar able to integrate faith and learning appears limited when students fail to sense that the faculty member has a genuine concern for them holistically.

In closing, while viable curricular areas for AFI have been identified in this research, it is crucial to remember that without proper rapport between the faculty member and the student, even the most strategic attempt at integrating disciplinary content with Biblical knowledge will likely fall flat.

AFI requires students to engage their spirit. However, in order to create a fertile environment, it is essential for faculty members to remember the reason for this work.

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