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Impact of Monastic Practices and Spiritual Disciplines on Student Leader Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand if practicing monasticism and spiritual disciplines impact the development of student leaders. The research was conducted through grounded theory qualitative interviews with eight student leaders who participated in a monastic trip for the duration of January 2016. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the question:

What impact does monasticism and spiritual disciplines have on the development of student leaders at a private Christian liberal arts institution?

The eight students were interviewed before and after their monastic trip, answering questions about monasticism and spiritual disciplines, student leadership, and trip expectations/experiences. Themes derived from the pre- and post-trip interviews conclude that participating in monasticism had a positive impact on the students in three core areas: inhabiting time, shift to other-oriented leadership, and whole-person development. Therefore, this study seeks to present implications for how educators can effectively incorporate monasticism into student leader training in order to better equip students emotionally, mentally, and spiritually as they begin their year serving as a leader on campus.

Overview of Research

This study seeks to assess the impact practicing monastic disciplines has on a student leader's approach to his or her role on their respective institution's campus. Three main variables are thus being explored: monasticism, spiritual disciplines, and student leadership.

To begin, monasticism, in regard to the Desert Fathers, was a movement in the 4th century from populated towns to the deserts surrounding the Roman Empire (Merton, 1960). Groups of men, and later women, retreated from their daily routines to live lives controlled by spiritual disciplines with the end goal being radical and spiritual connections to God. These men lived as cenobitic monks, practicing disciplines and living in community with one another (Gonzalez, 2010).

Spiritual disciplines include, but are not limited to, silence, solitude, and celebration. These disciplines build off of one another. Silence is the foundation for solitude (Foster, 1998) and celebration is the culmination of practicing spiritual disciplines. These disciplines, in turn, produce hope (Merton, 1955), strength, humility, trust, joy (Foster, 1998), compassion, gratitude (Brown, 2012), laughter, empathy, and the ability to see and interact with others in the ways God intends. The practice of these disciplines produce the inter- and intra-personal qualities educators desire to see cultivated in student leaders on their campuses.

Most colleges and universities possess a large population of student leaders serving in a variety of areas on campus while developing skills like responsibility, self-awareness, and communication. Through training, student leaders unlock leadership potential (Kouzes & Posner, 2008), collaborate with members of a team, and advance academically as well as interpersonally (Dickman, Fuqua, Hallenbeck, 2003). Additionally, when executed appropriately and effectively, student leader training results in positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral growth in the students while increasing their abilities to become emotionally intelligent leaders.

An example of student leadership on campus is the role of a Resident Assistant (RA). An RA's goals revolve around the residents he or she serves, desiring those students to grow, acquire resources, learn to live in community, feel included, and engage educational topics outside the classroom (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1984). An RA undergoes extensive training in order to learn how to effectively and appropriately lead and serve his or her hall. Many of the results of practicing spiritual disciplines coincide with the growth and learning outcomes educators desire RAs to foster as a result of training.

The current study aims to appraise the potential correlation between the implementation of monastic practices, modeled after the cenobitic practices of the Desert Fathers, and a student leaders approach to their leadership role. As previously argued, monastic practices and spiritual disciplines produce inter- and intra-personal qualities that are viewed as desirable traits for student leaders to possess. These traits affect student leaders' abilities to connect with the students they serve, engage in self-care, and contribute to a leadership team. If student leaders are able to engage these spiritual disciplines, the potential exists to positively strengthen their leadership foundation and, in turn, serve and care for the students at their respective institutions more effectively.

Therefore, the question this research aims to answer is: What impact do monasticism and spiritual disciplines have on the development of student leaders at a private Christian liberal arts institution?

Methodology and Results

The current study used a qualitative grounded theory with a constructivist approach to provide a subjective approach to the data and use of the resulted theory. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling in order to further understand the specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Interviews occurred over the phone and data was collected, coded, and themed.

At a private Christian liberal arts university, students had the opportunity to enroll in a monastic course for the duration of January 2016. This course took place at an off-campus site in central Washington. For the month, students engaged in a monastic routine involving times of service, study, worship, meal preparation, spiritual disciplines, small groups, and lecture. Students studied both spiritual disciplines and historic monastic practices, reading texts from Saint Augustine and Saint Basil. When initially contacted, eight students from the course self-identified themselves as a student leader, serving their campus in one of a variety of positions (i.e student government, residence life, small group leader, etc.). Those eight student leaders participated in a pre- and post-trip interview regarding their monastic experience. The results displayed are based on three themes which emerged from transcribing and coding participant interviews. Each theme is defined and subsequently broken down into codes derived from the data. The three themes include: perception of time, a shift to other-oriented leadership, and overall whole-person development.

Inhabiting Time

The data collected outlined a drastic shift in students' perceptions of time upon returning from their monastic experience. Before the trip, students viewed their current campus and community culture as busy and fast-paced. However, students returned home with an increased awareness of what it means to inhabit time, be present, and not become overwhelmed by schedules and deadlines. Student leaders learned to become emotionally, physically, and mentally present where they were, in what they were doing, and who they were with.

The concept of inhabiting time was introduced and modeled on the trip through a rhythm and rule of life defined by consistency and cenobitic community. Establishing a rhythm allowed students to schedule time for meals, study, service, and spiritual disciplines. This type of rhythm at first felt forced, but eventually resulted in freedom to inhabit time and practice presence. Gaining an ability to inhabit time as a result of experiencing cenobitic monasticism allowed students to enjoy meals, engage one another's stories, turn off their phones, and create rhythms to their lives.

Other-Oriented Leadership

Participants in the present study exemplified a shift from self- and achievement-oriented approaches in leadership to an other-centered mentality. This shift was affirmed through an increase in value placed on humility in leadership and an emphasis on social justice from studying St. Basil while on the monastic trip. An other-oriented approach to leadership affirms Kouzes and Posner's (2008) study on what creates potential within a student leader. According to Kouzes and Posner, five main practices cultivate an exemplary leader: being a good role model, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Each practice touches on empowerment, encouragement, and inspiration surrounding the interaction between student leaders and those they serve and work alongside. Additionally, Merton (1955) concluded in his writings that practicing spiritual disciplines produces humility, affecting the ways individuals interact with one another.

Several participants returned from the experience noticing a change in their relationship with team members. Those relationships began growing, which Gibson and Longo (2011) conclude is an imperative part of being on a leadership team. Working well on a team is an integral part of the leadership experience and growth. By experiencing

monasticism, student leaders returned to their leadership teams paying more attention to how to support and communicate well to teammates, which strengthened team relationships and dynamics.

Additionally, Allen and Shankman's (2008) Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (EIL) claims student leaders need to continually grow in the awareness of context, self, and others. By experiencing monastic practices, the students in this study demonstrated a growth in awareness of others. Several students specifically commented on their awareness of self, which in turn impacted their relationships with peers. Furthermore, participants' heightened understandings of social justice in relationship to monasticism and student leadership demonstrated a development within the context of EIL. Research on EIL also proposes that student leaders must be aware of their context and others. This awareness can be accomplished through an expansion on Kouzes and Posner's study inspiring their peers to think critically and emotionally about social justice and its role on campus.

Whole Person Development

Student leaders participating in monasticism and spiritual disciplines returned from the trip experiencing growth not only as student leaders, but as whole persons. Recognizing whole-person development is imperative to moving forward with the present research, findings, and implications. According to research by Dickman, Fuqua, and Hallenbeck (2003), student leaders engage holistic development by acquiring leadership skills and advancing both academically and interpersonally. This research is affirmed by students participating in monasticism exhibiting a growth personally, communally, and academically.

Furthermore, research conducted by Gohn, Murray, Newgent, and Paladino (2005) concluded educators need to "create an environment of continuous training programs and support" (p. 25). When seeking to incorporate monasticism into student leader training, educators must be aware of the big picture, taking into consideration the entire being of students and how they are impacted beyond their leadership roles when seeking to incorporate monasticism into student leader training. Consistent implementation of monasticism and spiritual disciplines fosters both personal and leadership development resulting in whole-person development.

Implications of Research

Understanding the impact of monastic practices and spiritual disciplines on student leaders and their whole-person development has several implications for both student leadership training and ongoing forms of training that occur throughout the school year. The data reveals positive impacts on student leaders having engaged monastic practices. Therefore, concerning student leader training, educators have the opportunity to take themes embedded in the data and incorporate them in three ways.

First, training sessions can cover a variety of topics implemented on the monastic trip including social justice, service, inhabiting time, being present, and various spiritual disciplines that translate to multiple faith backgrounds. Training sessions can explicitly look at historical monasticism, replicate the communal pieces of monasteries, study leaders in church history (i.e. St. Basil), and spend time in silence, solitude, and reflection. Moreover, these training sessions can take place outside of the institution, removing the students from campus and engaging these topics while unplugged from everyday life.

Second, educators must be aware of how to continually challenge their student leaders to make monastic values and spiritual disciplines consistent parts of their lives. Several participants commented during the interviews on the value of having a consistent rhythm and routine along with taking their studies one step further into a space of reflection. While there may not be time each week to fully engage monasticism, educators can use their weekly or monthly student leader meetings to reinforce monastic practices by setting aside time to partake in reflection or a specific discipline.

Finally, educators can implement monasticism half-way through the year by facilitating a retreat for their student leaders. Creating intentional time to leave campus and engage monasticism half-way through the year, as the participants of this study did, can allow students to take a break, check their priorities, and re-center themselves. A common theme among the participants' experiences and the presented implications is the focus on consistency and reflection when implementing monastic practices and engaging student leadership.

Conclusion

Practicing monastic values and spiritual disciplines positively impacted the development of student leaders. With the use of grounded theory qualitative interviews, the current study explored a specific event, remaining subjective with a constructivist lens in order to produce a theory regarding student leader training. By going on a monastic trip, participants discovered rest, healing, presence, strength, humility, and peace that affected them, their relationships, and their views of leadership. The current study proposes incorporating monastic practices into student leader training, consistently and with intentional reflection, as a means of equipping student leaders emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, as they begin their times of service and leadership on campus.

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