

Presentation Title

An Evaluation of Spirituality among Graduate and Professional Degree Students: Year Two

a. Purpose

[Note: This is a continuation of a study that was introduced at the 2013 GERA Annual Meeting.]

The purpose of this study is to measure spirituality in graduate and professional degree students utilizing validated survey instruments in order to investigate perceptions regarding the role of spirituality in higher education and professional practice. Results from our study will be instrumental in examining the influence of an academic institution on validated measures of spirituality. Furthermore, we hope to be the first to examine, from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, the change in daily spiritual experience among students of diverse graduate and professional degree programs at a single institution. We believe our findings have the potential to stimulate constructive dialogue on the imperative to develop methods for improved teaching and learning.

b. Perspective or Theoretical Framework

There is a void in the published literature regarding the role of spirituality, which is inclusive of all belief systems, among students enrolled in graduate and professional degree programs. In 2003, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) embarked on the first and only national, longitudinal study of college student spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). This study utilized a variety of scales to examine attitudes toward spirituality among 112,232 first-year undergraduate students across the country. A follow-up survey was completed during their junior year. While this study made significant contributions, one primary limitation was its sole focus on undergraduate education.

Several prominent institutions such as Duke University and University of Minnesota support centers of excellence committed to studying the role of spirituality as it relates specifically to health care. However, we are unaware of any institutions in the United States that examine spirituality in graduate and professional degree students enrolled in programs that span the health sciences, education, theology, music, and business.

The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), which is a sixteen item self-report survey instrument developed by Dr. Lynn Underwood, measures ordinary spiritual experiences (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The DSES incorporates various constructs related to spirituality, and measures relationship and awareness of the divine or transcendent during daily aspects of life.

The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL) is used to measure religiosity (Koenig & Büssing, 2010), and was developed to examine the relationship between health issues and religion. In this field, the DUREL has been used in over 100 studies (Koenig & Büssing, 2010).

c. Methods

During the first few weeks of the Fall 2012 semester, participants were recruited from eight colleges at Mercer University, which encompassed disciplines in pharmacy, nursing, physical therapy, theology, education, business, music, and engineering. These students were invited to complete the electronic survey. All incoming first year graduate and professional degree students were eligible for participation in the study. Participation was voluntary and responses were kept confidential. Given the diversity of program and course formats, the survey was kept open for five weeks to maximize participation across colleges. A follow-up survey was administered in April 2013 at the end of the academic year. The entire process was repeated

with new students during the 2013-2014 academic year. We plan to continue administering the survey longitudinally.

The instruments used in this study are the DSES, DUREL, and internally developed quantitative and qualitative questions related to the role of spirituality in higher education and professional practice. Furthermore, demographic information was collected.

d. Results

Our faculty team administered a preliminary version of this research survey to graduate and professional degree students from Mercer University during the Fall 2012 and Fall 2013 semesters. A total of 597 students participated in the survey: pharmacy (n=299), nursing (n=130), theology (n=63), physical therapy (n=30), education (n=29), business (n=21), and music (n=10). The majority of our students were within the 21 – 30 years age bracket and 72% were female. A strong degree of ethnic and racial diversity was reflected: White (52%), Black/African American (24%), Asian (16%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), Native American/Pacific Islander (1%), and other (5%). Interestingly, 60% of students reported that spirituality had an impact on their decision to pursue their specific degree of study and 61% anticipated that spirituality would be significant components of course work in their degree of study. Furthermore, >80% of students believed that spirituality would be incorporated or integrated into their eventual professional practice, and that personal spiritual experiences over the academic year would contribute toward academic success. One limitation of this study with respect to generalization of our results is that 81% of our sample expressed an affiliation to the Christian faith.

e. Implications & Recommendations

Society is witnessing a resurgence of appreciation for the role of spirituality in assorted dimensions of life. Institutions of higher education face increasing societal pressure to justify costs in relation to the services that are provided, and stakeholders rightfully demand value for

their expenditures. Within this challenging context, administrators and faculty are recognizing spiritual life as an integral aspect of a holistic educational experience. This study contributes to scholarship in this field at the national level by being the first to provide data regarding changes in daily spiritual experience, utilizing a validated survey instrument, among students of all belief systems at a single university offering a diverse array of graduate and professional degree programs. Findings from our research will be used to stimulate dialogue regarding the role of spirituality in higher education and innovative methods for improving teaching and learning.

f. References

- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Koenig, H. G., & Büssing, A. (2010). The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL): A five-item measure for use in epidemiological studies. *Religions, 1*, 78-85. Retrieved from <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/1/1/78/pdf>
- Underwood, L. G., & Teresi, J. A. (2002). The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, theoretical description, reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity using health-related data. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 24*(1), 22-33. Retrieved from <http://www.springerlink.com/content/1177j557v44k1874/>