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The Role of Student Affairs in Promoting Religious and Secular Pluralism and Interfaith Cooperation[1]

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Abstract

This essay explores the contributions of student affairs professionals to religious and secular pluralism and interfaith cooperation in higher education. The authors propose a preliminary model of competencies necessary for student affairs professionals to engage in conversations effectively with students about issues of religion, spirituality, secularism, and belief as well as to promote campus-wide transformation for religious and secular pluralism and interfaith cooperation.

Philosophical discussions of the purpose of higher education have long connected morality and virtue to the educational process as both process and outcome (Newman, 1996; Plato, 1992). The earliest models of higher education in the United States continued to promote this intersection, albeit largely from a homogeneous and religiously exclusivist perspective (Thelin, 2004). As Enlightenment philosophies about the separate roles of religion and science and the Germanic model of university education spread, higher education was transformed (Newman, 1996; Thelin, 2004). In the United States particularly, these influences led to the emergence of college administrators specifically charged with the life of the student outside the classroom (Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987; Thelin, 2004).

Despite the divorce of religion and science as partners in the learning and development of young adults in college, the philosophical foundations of student affairs work still accentuated the importance of considering the college student as a whole person (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937, 1949). Religion and spirituality were specifically mentioned as relevant components of holistic student development (ACE, 1937, 1949). As written in the first *Student Personnel Point of View* (*SPPV*) in 1937,

> This philosophy imposes upon educational institutions the obligation to consider the student as a whole—his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, his aesthetic appreciations. It puts emphasis, in brief, upon

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the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone. (ACE, 1937, p. 3)

In this way, student personnel workers (as they were first called) advocated for attending to the student's mind, body, and spirit as part of the purpose of education. In 1937, the authors of the *SPPV* included a list of appropriate services in which student personnel workers should be engaged as part of "an effective educational program" (p. 4). Among those services recommended to be adapted to suit specific institutional missions and goals is the following, listed as Number 7 of 23:

Assisting the student to reach his maximum effectiveness through clarification of his purposes, improvement of study methods, speech habits, personal appearance, manners, etc., and through progression in *religious* [emphasis added], emotional, and social development, and other non-academic personal and group relationships. (ACE, 1937, p. 4)

This position is maintained in the second edition of the *SPPV*, published by ACE in 1949: "The development of students as whole persons interacting in social situations is the central concern of student personnel work" (p. 2). The 1949 writers continue, speaking of the student, "As a responsible participant in the societal processes of our American democracy, his full and balanced maturity is viewed as a major end-goal of education and, as well, a necessary means to the fullest development of his fellow citizens" (p. 2). Religion is specifically mentioned again in 1949 as an aspect of that "full and balanced maturity."

Since then, concerns regarding the constitutionality of engaging students in discussions of religion, spirituality, faith, and belief have made student affairs professionals and faculty hesitant to discuss these issues with students, particularly at public colleges and universities (Lindholm & Astin, 2006; Rogers & Love, 2007; Strange & Rogers, 2003). Clark (2001) recommended that student affairs professionals keep in mind the distinctions between religion and spirituality as useful for navigating the relevant and important constitutional issues involved. Clark noted, "spiritual development may occur without an individual being a member of any organized religion" (2001, p. 38). His discussion continues to point out that the constitutional provisions of the First Amendment are intended to prevent the government from denoting one religion as better than another and from preventing individual expression of religious faith (Clark, 2001). These provisions do not prevent student affairs professionals from engaging students in discussions about how students find meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives or define themselves as members of a community. These are questions and concerns related to spirituality as defined by Parks (2000).

Students themselves are seeking opportunities to engage these questions during their college years with their peers as well as with faculty and staff (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). Higher education is an appropriate and particularly important mentoring community for spiritual development in young adults (Parks, 2000). Embracing a nonsectarian approach to spirituality helps to make religious and secular pluralism possible (Kazanjian, 2005). Such an approach must be undertaken with attention to the ways in which even nonsectarian institutions still reflect dominant religious beliefs that are embedded in cultural practices and traditions (Clark, 2001; Kazanjian, 2005). It is appropriate and necessary for student affairs professionals in higher education to return to conscious and intentional consideration of spiritual development as part of seeing the whole student. Understanding higher education's fractious history with engaging issues of faith and belief frames the context for considering what set of awareness, knowledge, and skills is necessary to engage most effectively in such dialogue with students in ways that do not reify the

climate of religious hegemony within which earlier generations of professionals and institutions practiced.

Connecting Student Affairs and Religious and Secular Pluralism

Toward this end, student affairs professional associations have responded by supporting communities of practice focused on issues of religion and spirituality in higher education. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) has offered a knowledge community in this area for several years. The group's mission is "to enhance and contribute to the conversations about spirituality in higher education across all types of post secondary institutions" (NASPA, n.d.). In 2008, a group of professionals within ACPA – College Student Educators International began discussions to form a commission-level entity that would focus on similar issues, and the Commission for Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning (CSFRM) was formally approved in March 2010.

The CSFRM has committed to influencing student affairs practice regarding issues of meaning and purpose and to do so from a pluralistic perspective that includes both religious and secular frameworks. The CSFRM seeks to acknowledge and incorporate multiple points of view and traditions within spirituality, faith, religion, and belief to better serve our students, institutions, and student affairs colleagues. In light of the historical and continued marginalization of diverse perspectives on faith, belief, and spirituality, we believe a focus on strengthening the skills necessary to engage students on these topics effectively, as well as on promoting religious and secular pluralism on campus, is essential.

Student Affairs Professional Competencies

At the foundation of most any profession is the establishment of basic expectations and acceptable standards of practice by its members. The profession of student affairs in higher education has identified essential competencies that are interwoven throughout the various professional functional areas in order to improve practice and services to the students and campus constituents with which professionals work. In July 2010, a joint task force from ACPA and NASPA produced a document titled *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners*, which outlined the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of competency that exist within the field of student affairs.

Competencies provide a framework for understanding the fundamental approach that all student affairs professionals must take, regardless of the area or office in which they practice. Contained within the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* is a section on "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion." This section explicitly addresses the importance of professional competency in assessing one's own awareness of equity, diversity, and inclusion as well as facilitating dialogue, implementing programming and services that are inclusive and respectful of diverse populations, and recognizing the interconnectedness of societies and cultures. Another critical component of competent practice is adhering to behavior that promotes ethical conduct as it relates to student affairs professionals' scope of practice. Both major student affairs professional associations address the importance of maintaining competence in their professional codes of ethical standards as well as professional standards statements (ACPA, 2006; Dalton, Crosby, Valente, & Eberhardt, 2009; NASPA, 1990). In order to practice ethically, student affairs professionals must ensure that they maintain a standard level of expertise and skill necessary to execute their daily functions effectively as well as foster professional relationships with students, faculty, staff, and other campus constituents (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007).

Proposed Student Affairs Competency Model for Addressing Spirituality, Secularism, Religious Pluralism, and Interfaith Cooperation (CMSSRIC)

C SFRM is proposing a set of competencies related to the myriad ways that students develop their understanding of purpose and meaning in the world. Some students address questions of purpose and meaning through spirituality or religion, whereas others rely on a more secular approach based in science or humanism. As professionals dedicated to holistic development, student affairs professionals need to be able to work with students along the paths (both individualized and communal) they use to find purpose and meaning in life. Furthermore, student affairs professionals must become comfortable in fostering dialogue regarding spirituality, religiosity, and secularism in order to help students understand the intersection of these approaches and enable civil conversations about these differences on campus. Two factors situate the need for this dialogue among student affairs professionals: (a) Student affairs professionals have traditionally focused on fostering holistic identity development. (b) Many secular institutions lack a campus ministry presence. In light of these factors, student affairs professionals may be the most appropriate facilitators of learning and development around spirituality, religion, and secularism within the campus community.

In order to be considered an ethical professional within the field of student affairs, individuals are expected to have the requisite training, education, and competencies to work effectively with students, faculty, staff, and other campus constituents. Although multicultural competencies have existed and been practiced for quite some time within the field (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004), there has been a gap regarding the application of multiculturally competent practice when it comes to student affairs professionals' awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding world religion, spirituality, and secular or humanistic perspectives within a cultural diversity context. As such, we propose the following competencies for student affairs professionals working with students and other campus constituencies to guide religious, spiritual, and secular approaches to finding personal meaning and life purpose. These competencies were reviewed by the directorate body and membership of ACPA's CSFRM. The model presented here incorporates and responds to the suggested additions and revisions that were offered. We also discuss ways practitioners can reflect on and apply the proposed CMSSRIC to their daily practice.

The Proposed Competencies

1. *Student affairs professionals can demonstrate awareness and respect regarding the difference between spirituality, religiosity, and secularism, recognizing the distinctions as well as the integration of these concepts and how they impact the lives of individuals and society.*

Frame (2003) identified the complexity of attempting to synthesize each of the world's major religions, spiritual traditions, and secular philosophies. Yet student affairs professionals have an ethical responsibility to learn to articulate how spirituality, religion, and secularism all share common elements as well as maintain clear demarcations in their meaning in people's lives. As affirmed by ACPA's *Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards* (2006),

> Student development is an essential purpose of higher education. Support of this process is a major responsibility of the student affairs profession. Development is complex and includes cognitive, physical, moral, social, emotional, career, spiritual, personal, and intellectual dimensions. Professionals must be sensitive to and knowledgeable about the variety of backgrounds, cultures, experiences, abilities, personal characteristics and viewpoints evident in the student population and be able to incorporate appropriate theoretical perspectives to identify learning opportunities and to reduce barriers to development. Multicultural competence is a fundamental element of ethical practice.

When engaging students in conversations about spirituality, secularism, and religion, student affairs professionals need to demonstrate the skills necessary to engage in such interactions and help students identify distinctions and similarities between these concepts and how they impact the ways students make meaning for themselves (Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009).

2. *Student affairs professionals are knowledgeable regarding world religions, humanistic world-views, and diverse spiritual perspectives and, when lacking information, actively seek out resources and professionals with such expertise.*

Being multiculturally competent does not mean memorizing information about every cultural group in existence. The same is true regarding knowledge of different religious, spiritual, or secular traditions and philosophies. It should also be kept in mind that the diversity of beliefs, practices, and experiences within every faith tradition should be honored and acknowledged. The expectation for student affairs professionals should not be that they have an encyclopedic understanding of each tradition but that they take the steps to garner new knowledge at appropriate opportunities and to admit their knowledge limitations, seeking resources to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills for more effective practice (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Pope et al., 2004). For example, contacts and information about various faith communities near campus can be kept at hand to share with students when requested.

3. *Student affairs professionals are cognizant of how spirituality, religion, and secularism can shape identity development and meaning making, both individually and collectively.*

Trautvetter (2007) referred to the term *holistic student development* as "the connections between the intellectual, moral, social, faith, and spiritual aspects of student development and how students develop within campus and societal contexts" (p. 238). Trautvetter further posited that holistic student development impacts learning and goals related to the vocational, professional, intellectual, cognitive, social, civic, political, moral, ethical, spiritual, and religious dimensions of students. Student affairs professionals can foster this growth in students by integrating traditional student development theories with spiritual and secular growth. Students' spiritual growth does not happen in isolation. Students' searches for meaning and purpose happen both within and without a spiritual dimension. Practitioners should focus on how to promote morals, values, character formation, self-empowerment, personal responsibility, and self-understanding in students (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Kneipp et al., 2009; Trautvetter, 2007).

4. *Student affairs professionals recognize the impact that religious privilege has on campus regarding issues such as the academic calendar, official campus holidays, programming, and religious/spiritual visibility and strive to challenge the pervasive reach of dominant spiritual, religious, or secular traditions.*

Student affairs professionals must serve as advocates for students from underrepresented worldviews, traditions, and humanistic perspectives regarding their needs and the potential invisibility some students may experience because their spirituality, religion, or worldview is not reflected in the majority culture on campus or in society. There is often the misperception that individuals who believe in some form of deity, higher being, or G/god are more in tune with shaping students' inner development and meaning making, compared to those who do not hold those same beliefs (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Goodman & Teraguchi, 2008; LePeau, 2007; Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009). Even secular, nonreligious institutions subscribe to policies, schedules, or programming that conforms to predominant, publicly recognized holidays and religious observances. Practitioners should be more mindful of how these campus structures impact the sense of isolation and bias that some

students may experience due to their different belief systems, which may not represent the majority culture. Implicit in this competency is also that student affairs professionals continually strive to challenge their awareness and knowledge regarding societal privilege generally and confront their own use of defense mechanisms (Watt, 2007) that would impede their ability to empathize with marginalized groups.

5. *Student affairs professionals are aware of how their own worldview, values, biases, and percep-tions about religious, spiritual, or secular traditions may impact the helping relationship and seek supervision and consultation when faced with hindrances to effective practice.*

As Seifert and Holman-Harmon (2009) point out, practitioners from a continuum of beliefs, which includes everyone from those who identify as very religious to those who are atheists, need to examine their own inner value systems, beliefs, prejudices, and biases toward individuals from different worldviews and traditions as well as recognize differences that exist within similar faith traditions. The focus should be on how to foster students' inner development in a way that is meaningful to them (Goodman & Teraguchi, 2008; Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009). Student affairs professionals should speak with supervisors, mentors, and others when they identify blocks that may prevent them from effectively supporting students. Professionals should be mindful of how their families of origin and being raised with or without certain religious or spiritual traditions, norms, and rituals impact interactions and discussions with students whose belief systems are different. Student affairs professionals must be comfortable listening to students' worldviews and belief systems that may be significantly divergent from theirs.

6. *Student affairs professionals recognize their own limitations and lack of knowledge regard-ing spiritual, religious, or secular traditions and collaborate with campus chaplains/ministers, community leaders/elders, healers, teachers, and other resources in providing information that supports the needs of students, faculty, and staff.*

Practitioners should strive to form ongoing partnerships with campus ministers, religious leaders in the community, and faculty and staff from various spiritual, secular, and religious back-grounds on campus. When faced with a complex situation involving a student's spiritual identity, student affairs professionals should find outside support and information that promote the dignity and welfare of those they serve.

7. *Student affairs professionals seek to ensure that students, faculty, staff, and guests have a respectful and appropriate space on campus devoted to meditation, prayer, solace, and quiet reflection.*

Scholars in the area of spiritual development encourage institutions to create safe places that foster meaning making and growth (Bing & Talmadge, 2008; Trautvetter, 2007). Creating these safe places may include having an intentional and permanent multifaith space for spiritual or religious services as well as secular forms of spirituality like meditation, yoga, intellectual or scientific discussions, or mindfulness practices. Advocating to find a permanent and publicly recognized space sends the message that the institution is committed to enhancing the spiritual and humanistic lives of its members.

8. *Student affairs professionals actively seek ways to foster constructive, meaningful, and pluralistic dialogues on campus concerning pathways to understanding purpose and meaning making, including religious, spiritual, and secular perspectives, especially traditions, world philosophies, or beliefs that are underrepresented or marginalized.*

LePeau (2007) offers practical suggestions on how to engage students and others on campus in discussions regarding spirituality and religion: Creating course curricula, having students journal and write papers, validating students' feelings and experiences, and utilizing guest speakers from multiple faith traditions are just some examples of ways student affairs professionals can foster debate and dialogue on the issue of religion, spirituality, and secular humanism. Bing and Talmadge (2008) recognized the importance of preparing ahead of time when dealing with challenging subjects like religion and spiritual pluralism. The key is to establish ground rules of respect and mutual understanding during such campus dialogues. Practitioners should also encourage members of the institution to listen actively to different viewpoints, ask open-ended, clarifying questions, and not engage in taking sides in a discussion. Normalizing the challenges of having serious conversations about spirituality, secularism, and religion is paramount. Student affairs professionals must become comfortable with discomfort—the balance of challenge and support (Laker & Davis, 2009). If student affairs professionals are not comfortable engaging in the topic, then how can they expect students to be?

9. *Student affairs professionals are prepared to assist students, faculty, and staff during spiritual or existential crises and spiritual identity development milestones by providing appropriate support, resources, and referrals that meet the spiritual, secular, or religious needs of the campus.*

In a study examining the impact that spirituality has on life changes among college students, Muller and Dennis (2007) discovered that creating a sense of meaning, purpose, and spiritual identity may positively impact the health dimensions (physical, mental, emotional, and social) of students and that professionals should foster increased attention to the intersection of health and spirituality. Student affairs professionals need to develop the capacity to understand that when students face crisis situations, whether in their own personal lives (such as a terminal illness or job loss of a family member) or a campus crisis (such as a university suicide or homicide) that they may turn to spiritual, religious, or secular philosophies as a way to make meaning from these tragedies or difficult life experiences (Love & Talbot, 1999). Students may struggle, particularly if their current belief system is incongruent with the beliefs or traditions of their families of origin.

10. *Student affairs professionals recognize the intersection of spiritual, secular, and religious identity with other aspects of students' cultural identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual/gender identity, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, and other underrepresented cultural markers.*

It is essential for professionals to recognize that students concurrently hold membership in multiple cultural groups and that it is a disservice to students to see them through only a single cultural lens. For example, it is critical to understand how issues of spirituality, secularism, and religion impact lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (LePeau, 2007); African American students (Stewart, 2009); or women (Townes, 1995). Students' spiritual or humanistic identities shape their sense of self, their ways of making meaning, and other aspects of their cultural identities (Tisdell, 2003). Student affairs professionals can be intentional in their programming efforts, for example, by having speakers who model the intersection of culture and religion, spirituality, and secularism in a normative manner, for instance, speakers on Native American spirituality or lesbian naturalist practitioners.

11. *Student affairs professionals demonstrate the skills necessary to effectively assess the needs of students, faculty, staff, and campus constituents as they develop purpose and meaning in their lives, regardless of the religious, spiritual, or secular approach they embrace.*

Practitioners are encouraged to work with institutional advancement, faculty, staff, and others on campus to develop assessment tools that are inclusive and respectful of a wide range of students' worldviews. For example, when professionals are gathering data related to admissions, residence life and housing, or involvement in cocurricular organizations, professionals should ensure that surveys and other data collection instruments include questions that enable a wide range of responses regarding students' spiritual, religious, and secular philosophies. Also, student affairs professionals should engage students in discussions to understand better how they are creating meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives.

12. *Student affairs professionals continually seek to enhance their own development regarding spirituality, secularism, religion, and meaning making; clarify their beliefs and values; and gain increasingly complex and nuanced understanding of their own chosen pathway to meaning and purpose and its application to their personal and vocational lives.*

In the midst of these considerations, it is imperative that student affairs professionals remain mindful of their own needs to pursue increasingly complex development of meaning and purpose. The professional competencies published by ACPA and NASPA (2010) include personal foundations among the necessary competencies needed by student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals seek out professional development opportunities such as workshops, webinars, conferences, and other experiences to gain increased awareness, knowledge, and skills to enhance competence in their work. Self-knowledge and awareness are cornerstones to effective practice with others and underlie each of the competencies discussed above.

Several of the competencies outlined above, particularly Numbers 2 through 5, lay an essential foundation to promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Moreover, we believe that supporting individual student development makes it possible for students to engage each other more effectively. As Pope et al. (2004) assert for multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills generally, competencies for addressing student spirituality, secularism, religious pluralism, and interfaith cooperation are aspects of a dynamic model of student affairs core competencies that includes advising and helping as well as teaching and training. Both of these competencies are critical skills for applying the proposed competencies regarding individual student development in meaning and purpose to collective interfaith action, dialogue, programming, and conflict mediation and resolution.

Conclusion

Developing professional competency within student affairs is an ongoing journey. Student affairs professionals must actively seek experiences that raise their awareness, knowledge, and skills in ways that enhance their growth as spiritual beings and humanist philosophers. The proposed CMSSRIC has been designed as a stepping stone toward furthering more intentional conversations, services, and programming efforts on college campuses in this arena. This proposed model will be posted online through the website for the CSFRM (http://www.myacpa.org/comm/spirituality), and follow-up conversations will be planned to engage professionals thoughtfully about how to apply these competencies to their work in specific functional areas. We invite continued conversation about these competencies from religious life professionals and faculty and other campus administrators.

A challenge in creating competencies that focus on a specific area such as religion, spirituality, and secular pluralism is that these new models lack empirical or qualitative measures to assess the impact that a potential framework has within the field. Future research is encouraged to examine these competencies in ways that are measurable and can provide more structure in understanding

how spiritual, secular, and religious pluralism and meaning making impact the lives of students and others in higher education. Developing such tools is an important next step in this process.

It is important to note that these competencies are a fluid tool: Practitioners are welcome to use these in practical ways that fit their own professional and institutional needs. Student affairs professionals are encouraged to utilize this model in a flexible manner that promotes interfaith and humanistic understanding. As Parks (2000) has written, higher education can serve a vital role as a hearth community where rich dialogue can occur that nurtures reflective thinking on issues of meaning and purpose and that foments respect and appreciation for the multiple pathways toward meaning and purpose that exist on campus. In this plurality of beliefs, strength is shared to help each other face the social challenges of the current time.

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