

Soul Story

Why campus communicators
need a spiritual lexicon

By ANDREA JARRELL

COMMUNICATIONS

When Whitney Doe was a high school junior in the midst of her college search, she wrote an essay for the University of California, Los Angeles' *Spirituality in Higher Education* newsletter called, "My Soulful College Quest," in which she lamented that "there are plenty of resources that judge a school's athletics, academics, party scene, campus safety, and even dining hall fare." Yet, she concludes, "There seems to be no resource that grades the soul of a campus." Doe, founder of *SpiritualTeens.com* and a regular columnist on *Beliefnet.com* who has been interviewed by many major media outlets, is now a freshman at Vanderbilt University where Chancellor Gordon Gee first got Doe's attention by noting what a spiritual generation hers is. Indeed, new research by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute reveals that 76 percent of today's college students are searching for meaning and purpose in life and only 17 percent do not consider themselves to be on a "spiritual quest."

Is this the purview of higher education, particularly secular higher education? Alexander Astin, co-principal investigator of the HERI study, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose" (spirituality.ucla.edu), says, "Get even the most hardcore secularist faculty members talking for 10 minutes, and you find that

they are deeply concerned about what we might call 'spiritual' issues." Astin says, "A growing unease about our society has led some [academics] to start talking about the 's-word'—spirituality.

While the word *spirituality* can conjure religious meaning, HERI researchers hope people will pause long enough to understand what they mean by it. The project defines spirituality broadly, essentially differentiating between students' inner and outer development. It explains spirituality, in part, as "the values and ideals that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose we see in our lives—and our connectedness to each other and to the world around us." For some students traditional religious beliefs will be central to their spirituality. For others, according to HERI, "such beliefs or traditions may play little or no part."

HERI researchers, who published the findings of their pilot project in 2004 and recently launched the second phase of what will be a multiyear project, acknowledge that "spirituality captures aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about." That's tricky terrain for campus marketers, but ground worth navigating if they are to understand what motivates students today and how those motivations intersect with what their



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campuses offer. In a competitive climate with the majority of prospective students searching for meaning and purpose, institutions that can speak to this spiritual quest are sure to have an edge.

WHY NOW?

HERI is not alone in turning attention to issues of spirituality, faith, and religion on college campuses. Last April, a Harvard University poll found seven out of 10 U.S. college students believe that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives. In her 2005 book *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America*, Naomi Schaefer Riley studied the recent growth of religious higher education and its influence on U.S. civic and political life.

Societal trends like the rise of the evangelical Christian movement and world events such as the current Iraq War have made the topic particularly potent. And after Sept. 11, religion became a hot area of study for students, faculty, and donors. And it's potent, too, in terms of what Robert Connor, president of the Teagle Foundation (www.teaglefoundation.org), has called in his essays and blog, "the big questions concerning personal and civic morality, the existence and nature of radical evil, tension between scientific and religious world views, and the relationship between wealth and happiness and power and justice."

In the January 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "One University Under God?" Stanley Fish asserts that "in every sector of American life, religion is transgressing the boundary between private and

public and demanding to be heard in precincts that only a short while ago would have politely shown it the door. And the academy is finally catching up." He later continues, "Announce a course with 'religion' in the title and you will have an overflow population. Announce a lecture or panel on 'religion in our time' and you will have to hire a larger hall. And those who come will not only be seeking knowledge; they will be seeking guidance and inspiration, and many of them will believe that religion—one religion, many religions, religion in general—will provide [those to] them. Are we ready? We had better be, because that is now where the action is."

But religion per se is not what students are after, says Richard Hesel, a principal with Art & Science Group, who has done market research for secular and faith-based institutions of all types. Religion can actually be a negative factor in attracting prospective students, he says. Indeed, campus communicators at religious-affiliated institutions often struggle to map the connection between religion and a resulting campus ethos that may appeal to the broader yearning that students have for the development of their spirits—a yearning that may have nothing to do with religious doctrine.

"What most students are looking for cuts across religious differences," says Hesel. Students can be drawn to faith-based institutions because of the kind of community they're going to find, not because they want to conform to certain religious standards. "They are looking for an anchor where they can find connectedness with fellow human beings," he says, "a place where values are

going to be important but where they can develop their own sense of the world and their own convictions."

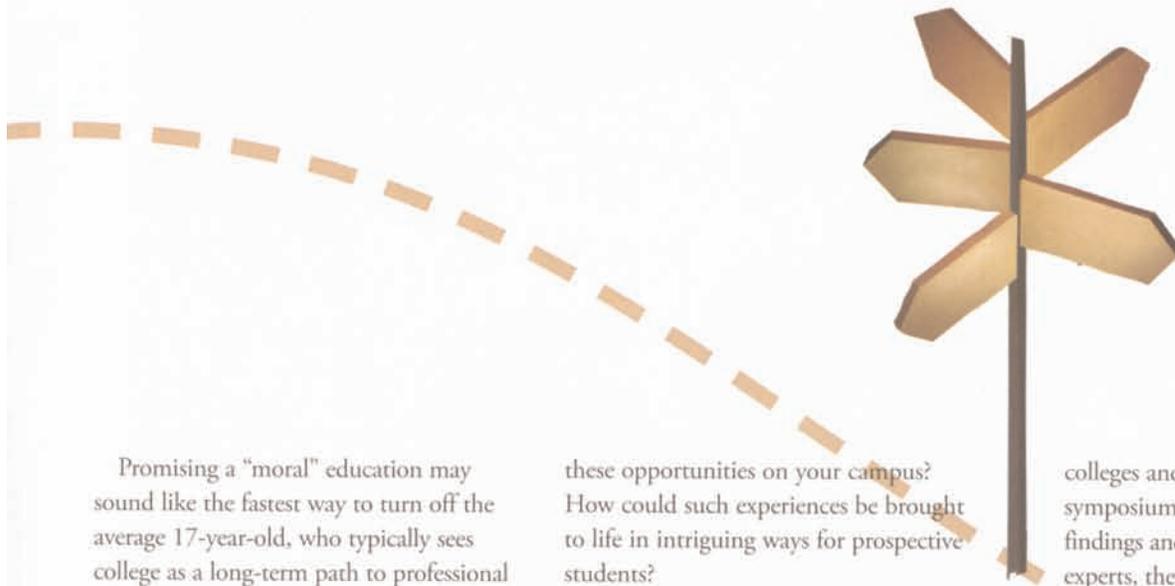
CREATING A SOUL STORY

Like the rules of polite dinner table conversation, institution marketing tends to steer clear of religion and spirituality for fear of turning off prospects with differing views. A few years ago, I was working with an admissions dean at a selective nonsectarian liberal arts college. He was on the fence about whether to include a story in the new viewbook that focused on a student's academic, social, and spiritual journey at the college.

"I wondered how many of our prospective students are spiritual," he said, "and what they would make of this." The HERI research now provides an answer for that dean, but statistics alone probably would not have helped him make a decision.

The dean's real quandary wasn't about the spirituality of prospective students but the spirituality of his institution. He is not alone. Most institutions have their academic, social, athletics, and artistic story down. Marketing communications are replete with these stories, but stories about the opportunity to develop the old-fashioned notion of one's character—who you are, who you think you ought to be, and how well you live up to that—are rarer.

Would such stories engage prospective students? Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Teagle's Connor says the foundation's work with students and faculty indicates that students are not only interested in these issues but also "hungry" to delve into them.



Promising a “moral” education may sound like the fastest way to turn off the average 17-year-old, who typically sees college as a long-term path to professional success and a short-term path to having fun. But is the challenge of conveying character or spiritual development in a compelling way any different from the challenge of conveying academic development?

Most campus marketers know that it takes creativity to present an academic program in lively, appealing, and relevant ways: engrossing images, details, and authentic voices conveying the experience and outcomes of unique programs, fieldwork, research, work with renowned scholars, and state-of-the-art facilities. To capture the life of the mind at their institutions, campus communicators have developed an academic lexicon—both verbal and visual—that is vastly different from the straightforward catalogue descriptions of decades ago. Such a lexicon is needed to capture the life of the spirit.

Just as campus marketers look to touchstones such as faculty mentorship, undergraduate research, intimate class size, diverse viewpoints, and hands-on learning to tell a rich academic story, the HERI research offers some spiritual touchstones to guide creating and telling a soul story. Markers such as attaining wisdom, enhancing self-understanding, preparing for responsible citizenship, improving the human condition, finding answers to the mysteries of life, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life are some of the elements that support the notion of a spiritual quest in the research. Do students have

these opportunities on your campus? How could such experiences be brought to life in intriguing ways for prospective students?

Clearly some institutions are already living and telling soul stories—consider how the themes of making the world a better place, global citizenship, service learning, and environmental stewardship are influencing student recruitment marketing at both secular and faith-based institutions. Indeed, the concept of “doing well by doing good” may be the most compelling “outcome” story on college campuses today—a story that can wed intellectual rigor and professional success to a student’s yen for meaning and purpose.

Developing a soul story that resonates with today’s students will likely come more easily for some institutions than for others—institutions with strong humanities cores, first-year experiences that incorporate reflection, diverse and thriving faith communities, rigorous service learning curricula, robust arts programs and cultures that value environmental stewardship and social action, just to name a few. Other campuses may find it more of a challenge. While HERI’s complementary faculty study indicates that a majority of faculty members believe educational goals such as enhancing self-understanding (60 percent), developing moral character (59 percent), and helping students develop personal values (53 percent) are “essential” or “very important,” the research also indicates that few students are currently supported by faculty in this spiritual quest. To help address this disconnect, in November HERI hosted 10 secular

colleges and universities for a three-day symposium. Focusing on the research findings and working with outside experts, the institutions sought to identify educational policies and practices that facilitate students’ spiritual quest—practices they can implement on their campuses that might serve as models for other institutions.

Years from now we might look back on nascent attempts at institutional spiritual narratives the way one might view the descriptions of community service programs a few years ago. Community service, once an extracurricular club listing, has evolved to become an integral aspect of many institutional stories. (HERI also provided much of the early hard data to support the concept of volunteerism and service learning.)

Ultimately, an institution’s spiritual lexicon might not include the s-word. Stories may focus on meaning, purpose, finding one’s calling, ethical leadership, or intellect partnered with faith.

But by acknowledging, as HERI has found, that the majority of college students “place a premium on their spiritual development and many of them hope—indeed, expect—that the college experience will support them in their spiritual quest,” campus marketers might find a new way to connect with prospective students and more effective ways of communicating the benefits of their institutions. ■

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