

## **How College Fosters Faith Development in Students**

**By Larry A. Braskamp, Lois Calian Trautvetter, and Kelly Ward**

### **Introduction**

For the past three years we have been involved in projects supported by the Lilly Endowment Inc. and Templeton Foundations in an effort to learn more about faculty involvement in student development at church related colleges. Findings generated from this project will be reported in an upcoming book, *Putting Students First*, to be published by Anker Press.

In our study of ten church-related colleges, we sought to better understand the ways in which faculty are committed to the cognitive and psychosocial (including spiritual and moral) development of students both in and out of the classroom. In our research we have used the word faith-- making meaning out of life--- to include matters of spirituality and religious commitment. We also included as a part of faith the notion of finding purpose in life, which includes such questions as: "Who am I?" and "How do I want to contribute to this world?"

Using Personal Investment Theory (Maehr and Braskamp, 1986) as the conceptual framework to study and analyze potential influences of the sociocultural environment on student patterns of behaviors as well as inner life, we divided the environment into four major domains in which student development takes place: the curriculum, co-curriculum, culture, and community (on campus and off). Specifically we studied the extent to which faculty and other professionals, such as student affairs and campus ministry professionals, assist and guide students to examine their purpose in life.

### **The Spiritual Dimensions of Faculty Curricular Efforts**

Despite the significant differences in the faith and religious orientations at the ten colleges, from those with a distinct church affiliation or faith perspective to those that currently have little or virtually no organizational or theological affiliation with the founding church denomination, we found that faculty and their student affairs and ministry colleagues were committed to fostering student development, and more specifically, the "spiritual dimensions" of student development. However, the desired end of the "spiritual journey" varied greatly among these colleges,

ranging from those with a strong preference towards a specific Christian worldview or perspective, to others with a strong commitment to honoring and fostering diverse worldviews and perspectives.

What they all have in common is a mission committed to helping students examine their lives in terms of an Aristotelian “good life”; a set of principles often in conflict with contemporary definitions of a successful life as measured by money, prestige, materialism and power. Spiritual issues increasingly surface in the classroom, residence halls, and faculty offices, where faculty are involved in helping students wrestle with such matters.

Three examples from our research perhaps best illustrate how colleges support students on their spiritual journey. One is curricular, one is co-curricular, and the other is representative of campus community. At Hope College, all seniors enroll in a senior seminar, taught by a variety of professors. One of the sections is entitled, “The Good Life,” which illustrates the importance placed on exploring “meaning in life” while also enabling students to think about their personal values and gain perspective on what is worth knowing and doing in life. In addition, Hope requires all seniors to enroll in a “Senior Seminar,” intended to serve as the capstone to their educational experience. The seminar is described in their school catalog as “stressing personal assessment of one’s education and life view.” One professor of philosophy at Hope organized her senior seminar course, entitled “Saints, Heroes, and Ordinary People”, around the question, “How good should the good life be?”. Students read a number of biographies, novels, and stories that illustrated how various people lived their lives, some Christian and some not, to “stimulate their thinking.” Students wrote six “reaction papers” to the readings and a short paper providing a statement of what students thought was the essential content of Christian faith. They could either write from a “believing stance” or a “distanced stance.” The seminar course emphasized discussion and sharing among the class members and each student was required to write a “Life View Paper.” In this major assignment, students were to “articulate a philosophy for living in a coherent, disciplined, yet personal way.” The course’s syllabus ends with: “Your life view paper should be yours. Please do it in a way that allows you to do your best at expressing yourself and grappling with the issues of the course and of your life.”

As a second example, Villanova University has consciously developed its school ethos, course offerings, and volunteer programs around its Augustinian mission and identity as expressed through their motto, “faith seeking understanding.” This focus supersedes a strictly religious dimension; it instead engenders a philosophy of life symbolized by the burning heart that represents service and caring for others. Villanova supports a popular program, “Service Trips” which can be viewed as an integration of faith and learning in action. This volunteer program, involving over 600 students each year, is under the direction of the Associate Director of Campus Ministry. While students do not earn academic credit, they have many opportunities for reflection. Faculty members are involved

as “advisors,” educating students on salient issues and helping to link volunteerism to learning and development.

The program’s mission, developed by the Director and student participants, summarizes the goal of this program clearly: “A student leader will be aware of their own sacredness so as to empower others to experience and act out the sacred in themselves, so that they may freely use their gifts to serve the common good.” The Director has designed this program in a manner that makes understanding the developmental needs of the students involved central to the development of the program. An atmosphere of safety and openness is created for students as they are pushed beyond what they know they can do, while being provided a “safety net” -- a “sacred place” for them to change.

A third example is provided through the lived experiences of a Jewish student that we interviewed at the University of Dayton, a predominately Catholic institution. The Marianist tradition and mission emphasizes community and serving others. She explained to us that because the cultural environment in and out of the classroom integrated faith and learning, she felt free to begin her own faith exploration. Through this journey she came into informal contact with a few Jewish professors on campus who offered her support and guidance. Likewise, Dayton’s campus ministry also helped her, along with other students, to establish a Jewish student group, now consisting of 30 plus students. These students attend religious ceremonies, as well as share meals in professors’ homes. They have found a community to explore their faith.

### **What are the challenges to faculty in cultivating student faith development?**

Not all faculty desire and nor know how to engage students in activities in which the students are expected to integrate this inner life—spirituality, personal values, religious commitments—with their intellectual and academic pursuits. Throughout our study, faculty often represented themselves as “more comfortable with the head than the heart.” Many faculty did not consider it relevant to introduce issues of personal meaning into the classroom or enter into spiritual discussions given that their graduate training prepared them to focus on subject matter and discipline over the spiritual or developmental inclinations of students.

Faculty who did attempt to address these issues, engaged in a number of pedagogical strategies to elicit student views, such as small group discussion, personal journey papers, etc. They tried to link the topics of required readings to the personal lives of students.

Another challenge is one of establishing boundaries between students and faculty. Where are the boundaries and when do faculty cross over them and adopt roles that resemble those of a counselor or pastor rather than a scholar or teacher? We found no single or simple answer to this question. The establishment of boundaries varies by college and institutional tradition. The one

common theme we found was that “faculty must be themselves” to be effective mentors and teachers. They needed to “walk the talk” to enter into any type of trusting relationship with their students. For many, demonstrating individual integrity was essential to establishing an open and safe environment both in and out of the classroom. However, faculty often felt vulnerable when issues of spirituality and personal perspectives were considered a part of the educational experience they were asked to provide.

In addition, many faculty were reluctant to engage in such endeavors, as it took time to establish significant trust so that discussions of faith, personal values and spirituality could effectively take place. Most had little experience in such matters and meager guidance by way of professional development. Often, faculty were all too aware of the difficulties involved in introducing “private” matters into the classroom, and they were concerned about having too much influence in shaping students’ particular perspectives.

Faculty at the ten colleges under study were interested in challenging students to examine their life—goals, religious commitments— and helping these students to become more open to a diversity of perspectives. In doing so, faculty sometimes not only dealt with skeptical students but their parents as well. Getting involved in personal matters like faith development can trigger a response from the “helicopter parents” — parents who always seem to be hovering over campus, intervening at any moment with phone call. Thus, working with students often means dealing with parents, who often regard themselves as their child’s friend and ally in the exploration of these important life issues.

Strategically, fostering a holistic student development approach places a heavy responsibility on the faculty since they maintain the most significant contact with students in and outside the classroom. Therefore, how faculty teach, conduct their research, present their scholarship, select course topics, and interact with students as mentors and scholars are all important. Student formation is not to be relegated to the offices of student affairs or campus ministry, or worse yet ignored. Faculty must play a significant role in this developmental task.

### **What are the benefits to faculty involvement in students’ spiritual growth?**

Students, faculty, and the institution benefit when a college focuses on developing students holistically. The intellectual and spiritual growth of students cannot be viewed as separate, unique tasks. When faculty are active in linking “intellectual and moral purpose,” students have opportunities to grow in their faith—to find meaning in life and seek careers and an existence that reflects who they are and desire to become. This growth is fundamentally connected to their intellectual development.

Faculty members who are engaged in assisting students with their holistic development find it both challenging and rewarding. It provides them with

opportunities to grow and develop holistically as well. It is intellectually and personally challenging to engage students in integrating their faith with their learning. For example, helping students to have a perspective and define a set of values that also requires them to respect others is challenging. Because of this shared experience, faculty in our study found these relationships with students to be personally rewarding and motivating. Lifelong friendships often emerged.

Finally the institution also benefits. Getting involved in issues of faith and spirituality forces the college as a whole to clarify its identity and character. Colleges that sponsor events and classes in which diverse views are examined have an opportunity to reflect upon their institutional practices. For some colleges, the benefits of such self-evaluation include a more refined sense of mission, while for others it allows them to be hospitable and tolerant by encouraging a plurality of worldviews.

Creating an environment that promotes self examination provides opportunities for all parties to learn how to be critical thinkers and to appreciate diversity within others. It requires students to engage critically as well as constructively. Moreover, such opportunities must go beyond tolerance to teaching how best to engage with others before reacting or judging. In our increasingly pluralistic world, everyone can benefit by engaging in conversations and interacting with those who possess differing perspectives.

### **What were some of the surprises generated by our data?**

Faculty at these church colleges were often torn between getting more involved as mentors and teachers and managing their disciplinary obligations as researchers. While the faculty in our study did not view these roles as mutually exclusive, they were challenged by the limited time available to adequately balance their student and faculty (self) focus.

Faculty varied considerably in how much they wished to assist students in developing their faith and spiritual development. All, however, adhered to two general principles: "one must be oneself to be an authentic role model" and "one must walk the talk." Faculty varied in their intentionality and patterns of behavior depending on their cultural background, past and present religious and church affiliations, family patterns of social interactions, opportunities in the classroom to address issues of personal values and faith, discipline, generation, and individual characteristics and predispositions.

Colleges also differed in how, and to what extent, they fostered holistic student development that included spiritual and religious dimensions. However, since religion and spirituality are becoming a larger part of the greater society and culture, many of these colleges were more directly addressing these issues, but within a pluralistic framework. Many of the colleges under study were not aware

that they were forerunners in their struggle to adequately support faculty as scholars, teachers, and spiritual role models.

## **Conclusion**

These colleges prepared students for life after graduation in ways that was consistent with what we know to be a liberal education. As higher education has become more career-oriented, it has failed to heed the advice of early vocational and career psychologists who emphasized the connection between one's personal characteristics—values, and purpose as well as aptitudes and skills—and the requirements of the career (Parsons, 1909). Students could benefit by knowing who they are, knowing expectations of a given career, and viewing career as a part of a larger calling or vocation.

Today's separation between career and calling is due in part to higher education's clear vocational orientation. The colleges in our study, however, have proven themselves to be forerunners in questioning the widely held principle that students might best prepare themselves for their life journey, particularly in the world of work, by being enrolled in a professional career curriculum. These church colleges regard meaning and purpose not as private matters, divorced from the intellectual and academic pursuits, but rather as an individual investment towards "making a difference" in this world. These colleges were concerned about linking career and calling so that graduates have opportunities to cultivate skills in critical self-reflection as well as a new lexicon for experiencing their chosen vocation. They recognized and supported the view that careers were important in the lives of college students and did not try to deny the centrality of careers in educating students. Rather, they attempted to create an environment so that students could better integrate their careers and discern their purpose in life.

## **References**

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