

Normalizing and Supporting Students' Spiritual Struggle: An Interview with Pam Viele

By Pam Viele

Through her interview, Viele highlights various contexts and catalysts that cause students to struggle spiritually while in college. With over 30 years of experience working with college students, Viele discusses how such struggles provide students with opportunities to reflect on their lives and the big decisions they make in college about meaning and purpose. She encourages higher education to be both reactive in addressing students' struggles by recognizing signs of student distress as well as proactive by modeling life balance and self-nurturing behaviors in our own lives in order to support students' spiritual development.

Please describe your background and experience interacting with students who are encountering spiritual struggles while in college.

I have more than 30 years of experience working directly with students in health education and student development as the current Director of Student Development at UCLA. In this role, I oversee various student affairs units, including the Student Development and Health Education Office, the Center for Women & Men, and the Student Affairs Information & Research Office. This exposure to various areas provides me with a broad perspective and insight into students' needs and experiences in order to better understand their development in college.

This position also provides me with the opportunity to be involved with students both programmatically and academically. The Student Development and Health Education Office currently offers seven courses taught for academic credit, including the undergraduate course Life Skills for College Women and Men. This course was developed in order to provide students with a space to learn, practice, and discuss practical life skills for college success, such as stress and coping, identity development, and interpersonal development. We also offer academic seminars for incoming freshmen and transfer students to help them transition to college and provide them support in related areas.

These courses provide many opportunities to integrate spirituality and wellness into the curriculum through class discussions, assigned readings, and reflective journaling. In these courses, students often make connections directly related to better understanding their life's purpose and gaining greater meaning from their college experience, making sense of the struggles they experience.

**In what contexts do spiritual struggles tend to be expressed by students?
Please touch upon any main themes you have witnessed regarding these struggles.**

I see students' struggles as very much connected to the process of identity development and the search for life meaning and purpose. What I've noticed over the years is that although students may not use the term "spirituality" to describe their struggles or developmental challenges that they may be experiencing, I often interpret these issues as such, and by doing so, I find ways to begin to support students in moving through these struggles in transformative ways. According to Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys of incoming freshmen, a majority of students indicate that finding their purpose in life is a very important reason for attending college. I see this as indicative of an interest in spiritual development. In my role, I interact with many students who are engaged in a purposeful quest for meaning that reinforces these data.

I also find it useful to draw on the work of various student development theorists in my efforts to help students navigate the challenges they face in spiritual and other life domains. For example, Marcia and Josselson's work helps us to understand students' spiritual struggles based on the extent to which they have explored their own spiritual identity in relation to their level of commitment to a spiritual identity. I see some students who come into college very committed and who don't explore. I think they sometimes are fighting *not* to struggle by avoiding considering other perspectives and beliefs because they have been told what they are supposed to believe. I also see a larger subset of students that may feel either uncommitted or committed to a spiritual identity when they enter college whose experiences during college challenge them and lead them to explore. That process of exploration ultimately facilitates greater learning and development, even though it often entails a struggle.

In my experience, I have witnessed different "catalysts" that cause students to experience various spiritual struggles and to re-examine their lives in order to come to a deeper understanding of their personal identity and how they fit into the world. I often see students struggle in academic contexts as they begin to experience difficulty, which leads them to ask, "why am I pursuing this course of study?" In terms of Perry's model of cognitive development, when students face a challenge or begin to struggle, they move from an accepted, dualistic status into a realm where they begin to question their choices and ideas and expand their perspectives through judgment in their decision-making process.

Through this questioning process, students then begin to link these academic struggles to the much larger questions of “who am I?” and “who do I want to become?” as they search for deeper meaning in their lives. Ultimately this leads them to consider “who’s life am I living: my parent’s life or my life?” as they decide what path to take – from choosing a course of study to deciding what to get involved in outside of the classroom.

Another catalyst I often see is when students begin to question and test their values and accepted beliefs as they form interpersonal relationships, especially romantic relationships. Many students who are raised with the ideology that they need to date and marry someone of the same faith begin to question this idea while in college. This process of questioning a long-held belief and testing it for oneself can lead to acceptance of this belief as important or to rejection of this belief based on their own experience. In this way, I view college as a time when students begin to make these independent decisions as a result of such struggles.

I also see students grappling very directly with issues of faith and spirituality in their lives. This process of struggle often plays out as students gain exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives and then begin to personalize their faith and come to a deeper understanding of the background and faith tradition in which they were raised. These patterns relate very strongly to Baxter Magolda’s idea of constructing meaning and achieving a sense of self-authorship as students move from a place of being given an identity to personally examining it for themselves.

This process of self-examination helps students develop deeper meaning and a personal connection to these beliefs; in other cases, students may choose to revise or reject prior beliefs in favor of other ideologies after this period of exploration and related struggle. In some occasions, students may reject religious practices, but still ascribe to a set of moral values that guide their actions. There are just so many variations in the ways that students express their spirituality, especially through their struggles.

What is the impact of spiritual struggle on students’ development in college? Please describe any signs or symptoms of struggle as well as any positive benefits.

While students are grappling with spiritual issues, they often are so busy with all that is going on in their lives that it takes a time of struggle for them to become aware of the need to pay attention to what they are experiencing. All of these signals of distress represent our body’s “inner wisdom” telling us that there is a “you” here that needs attention. The onset of either physical or emotional signs of distress – from difficulty sleeping, ruminating thoughts, anxiety, and even depression – all become signals that end up prompting the student to recognize “this is something I need to pay attention to.”

During these times of struggle, students may begin to realize that what worked in the past to help them ease their struggles no longer is effective, motivating them to try new coping mechanisms to grow through their struggles. The resistance to acknowledging that something is not working sometimes stems from a fear that there is nothing that

can be done to alleviate this feeling. Oftentimes students feel so alone and isolated in their crises so they have the natural tendency to retreat instead of reaching out to embrace their challenge and to share their struggles with others. Sometimes students will make choices to try and remove the pain and the symptoms of distress in ways that are temporary fixes, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and obsessively playing video games, using these negative behaviors to attempt to manage the distress they are experiencing.

On the other hand, there is also a greater motivation to try and remove the distress through positive alternative behaviors, such as prayer, regular exercise, yoga, and mindfulness meditation; all of these practices work to support well-being and feeling centered, connecting them to a larger purpose. These times of change and growth can be revolutionary in students' development while in college, helping them transition from dependence to interdependence as they begin to seek out deeper meaning and purpose in their lives.

In your work, please highlight any programs or interventions that have been successful at identifying and/or providing support for students experiencing such struggles.

One such program I touched upon before is the Life Skills class that we teach through my department. This course came about after students told us what they needed to support their growth and development in college. We asked students "how can we support you as you become the person you aspire to be?" Students shared that a course designed to teach practical self-management skills would help them incorporate these practices into their lives on an ongoing basis. In this way, the Life Skills course teaches students to be proactive in addressing their struggles – instead of simply reactive – in order to recognize these signs of distress and cope with them effectively.

With this in mind, we developed a course that focuses on the whole student. This holistic approach allows us to engage in discussions about real issues students are facing as those issues emerge. A lot of what happens in this course revolves around empathy development and hearing others' stories to form a greater appreciation of the combined universality of human experience and the uniqueness of individuals' struggles and successes.

The first unit of the Life Skills course focuses on a stress-behavior response where students walk through a module on the impacts of stress and the difference between positive and negative coping patterns; they then are taught specific behavior modification exercises through cognitive restructuring and positive self-talk where they reframe their negative stress-responses into more positive reactions that facilitate growth. Combined with the regular practice of meditation, students report that they are better able to recognize stressful situations and challenges and are then able to practice proactive strategies to minimize these feelings before they become overwhelmed.

We have found that this skill-based model provides us with ongoing interaction and the opportunity to develop meaningful and growth promoting relationships with students throughout the eleven-week course. It also allows students to practice these skills and receive feedback regarding their growth. A major component of this process is the involvement of Peer Mentors – former class members who return to help guide new students through the course material. These Peer Mentors say that experiencing class in this new role reinforces what they already have learned as students in the course, while deepening their understanding of these concepts and sense of connection to their fellow peer classmates. This element of the course further reinforces the notion that “we are here to support each other,” both as peers and as educators to enhance each other’s well being.

In addition to the benefits of the Life Skills program, other campus units have also provided resources and training programs to support students in developing skills to manage distress in a healthy manner. For example, the training that goes on in the residential halls, specifically regarding communication skills and the intentional focus on building community, models a proactive approach to supporting students in college and helps peers understand and identify signs of distress in themselves and other students. Similarly, student counseling and psychological services also plays a very important role in building students’ healthy capacities to manage distress. In my experience, many institutions have similar resources that help train staff and peer educators to identify signs of distress and support students through their struggles.

What are additional ways that higher education faculty and staff can better understand students’ struggles and support them through their developmental process while in college?

Based on the example of the Life Skills class and many other programs and practices that are similar in nature and intent, I feel that we can create courses, programs, and trainings that help to normalize these challenging experiences so students know that they are not alone in their struggles and that people are there to support them. When this message is reinforced through new student orientation and then again in their residence halls and classrooms, students can begin to understand that struggle is a *normal* and *necessary* component for their growth and development in college. When we consistently express compassionate concern for students and show them that they are cared for and supported, we create an environment that enables students to open up about their struggles and to utilize the resources that are available to help them. Students never should feel like they have to do it alone.

The power of relationships is incredible. When you reach out to students with a compassionate heart, when you communicate to students that you are genuinely interested in them and care about their well being, they understand immediately and you begin to build the trust that provides the foundation for being able to address students’ struggles appropriately. In responding to students’ struggles as staff, faculty, and peer mentors, we need to be able to recognize signals of distress and help students begin to interpret them in order to better understand the meaning of their struggles. In

this way, we are throwing out a metaphorical life preserver to offer support as we create a pathway for transformation and development.

We also must be intentional about modeling positive, healthy behaviors and lifestyle patterns as individuals and in our campus units. Learning and practicing self-care is not something we are explicitly taught as we are socialized into young adulthood. In a culture that is so focused on production and individual success, we are not taught to take care of ourselves – only to give of ourselves and to sacrifice in order to get ahead. Yet, if we do not model life balance and self-nurturing behaviors in intentional ways in our own lives, how do we expect students to practice these behaviors in their lives?

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