

The Role of Spirituality in Student Affairs and Staff Development

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Why should we pay attention to the spiritual development of student affairs staff?

If there is one good reason to consider the spiritual development of student affairs staff it is that it will help us survive personally and professionally in the demanding jobs we have. By the nature and responsibilities of our work we often put the concerns of students and other colleagues ahead of our own and flirt with physical and emotional exhaustion on a regular basis. We owe it to ourselves to be grounded and centered, especially in the most challenging times of each semester, so we can speak and act from our core values. Walking the talk of our field and of our colleges is a way of professional life and for those of us working at religiously affiliated institutions this also means integrating the values of our institutions into our lives in a way that is meaningful to us.

We are also managers and supervisors who have arrived at positions of influence with responsibilities for the training and retention of our personnel. The precious budget dollars in the professional development line items are one of the key ways we can provide meaningful staff meetings and workshops to boost productivity. Those goals cannot be accomplished without consideration of the whole person when working with staff. There is no more central part of the whole person than the spirit.

We are also mentors for students and for student para-professionals and try to model holistic development or integrated liberal arts or character development that includes a spiritual dimension. Most often we work through our staff to achieve these ends but the ultimate goal is assessment of growth by students on all dimensions. Our boards and the public demand nothing less.

Many are not reading this article for these reasons, however, but because of greater aspirations and higher standards for our work. In the end we are meaning makers. We structure the reality of college life through our programs, activities, social-norming approaches. We want to create better learning environments or learning communities to prepare our students to assume leadership positions as good citizens in society. We hope to prepare students to speak to the deepest needs of those communities and start a snow ball rolling in the direction of the common good because it is the right thing to do.

We seek nothing less than building a better world. We seek to change our institutions into more just organizations, to have those institutions create an impact in higher education and for higher education to play a leadership role in building a better world. Our expectations of our staff members and their expectations of themselves are therefore very high.

How do we devise professional development programs to speak to this level, to the deepest hopes and aspirations of our staff members? How do we prepare meaning makers for this type of social architecture? Preparing staff members for this challenge requires We grounding in the core values staff members hold dear and in the core values of our institutions. This is what we mean by spiritual development.

When we talk of spiritual development we are not speaking of “religiosity”. That is a term referring to institutionalized religion or belonging to established religious organizations. We are speaking of the “spiritual dimension of a person’s life” or that part of the holistic approach to student development/staff development. We see spiritual growth as the core dimension of a person’s development, the key (linchpin) to further growth. Physical, emotional, psychological, social, environmental, intellectual development are inextricably tied to spiritual growth and enhanced by paying attention to this as a key to learning.

Robert Bellah has referred to this dimension as developing the “habits of the heart”.¹This article is about developing those habits of the heart in our staff members. It will also be about the role that student affairs staff play in developing the habits of the heart of our colleges and universities.

Where to begin?

The starting point for enhancing the spiritual development of our student development staff is our own deep soul work, reflection on our own lives and what gives them meaning. What is it that matters to us? What are the values that guide our lives? Are there significant experiences we have had that have made us into the people we have become? How does what we believe influence our relationships with those who are close to us or those we work with? What has drawn us to the work we do? These and other questions can lead us into our soul work and enhance our own habits of the heart.

It is our experience working with staff that they are very willing to talk about their own spiritual journeys and what gives their lives meaning. We have yet to work with a group of student development professionals that was not on some level eager to share what was most important to them. As student affairs professionals we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to foster not only the growth and development of ourselves and the individual students and staff for which we are responsible, but also to impact the larger college environment. In short we have the opportunity to create a better world locally on campus. To create that world requires positive action, but it also entails an awareness of the pitfalls and roadblocks that await us.

The Current Inhibitors to Soul Work in Student Affairs

Remember the Hippodrome ride at amusement parks? The ride consisted of a round structure. When we enter, we cluster towards the center of a large cylinder. As the ride

¹ Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah,, Robert Maden, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.

begins, the cylinder starts to spin. The spinning increases until one by one we are pulled away from the center to the outer edge of the walls. At its peak speed, the floor drops out from under us, and we stay plastered against the outer wall.

This image is an analogy of the kind of work-life that most of us experience in Student Affairs. We spin faster and faster and eventually we can no longer hold onto the center. Over time, we are pulled apart from one another as the speed of "to dos" increase. Eventually the floor drops out from beneath us. Needless to say, it is difficult to live an examined life, if one is without a solid grounding.

Spiritual principles flow from the belief that we are all connected. This connectivity recognizes that we have an interdependent relationship with each other, and all of nature. Juxtapose this idea with the fragmentation of our work lives. Despite the larger trend to blur boundaries, silos are still alive and well in higher education. Our language is one indicator of the boundaries we maintain. We use names like departments and divisions to mark our territory. We have informal rules of behavior that state we should mind our own business. For example, "I won't interfere in your work, if you don't tell me what to do." There are also subtle forms of power that keep us in our own space, and don't support individuals that try to work across boundaries. For example, how many of us have seen or created a job description that is impossible for one person to accomplish? Or how many of us have a job that is bigger than a 40-hour workweek? The pressure to perform, please, and complete our job quickly keeps us out of living in the present. We put our heads down and plow through, which causes us not to be present to others and ourselves or develop the relationships necessary for facilitating connection.

The pace of our work doesn't allow for reflection. The action bias is strong in student affairs. We often define our worth on how fast we solve problems, or our ability to make problems go away. This creates a treadmill effect that works against reflective questions and covenant relationships.

Another cultural artifact of student affairs is the need for approval. This works against our own spiritual process. When we seek approval, we need to control those below us in order to create the conditions to be approved by our boss. Controlling others diminishes their spiritual development and our own as well.

In student affairs, we not only have silos; we also have legal standards. The fear of being sued can cause us to be cautious and reduce our relationships to a transactional level. Spiritual relationships are formed in a covenant between people. A covenant relationship extends beyond the legal minimum requirements. When we hold back or relate based on legal standards, we also limit the quality of and potential impact of our relationships. We learn to protect our organizations, and ourselves which eventually diminishes the service and care of our students and ourselves.

Creating an organization that supports spiritual work.

Two levels of support are needed to enhance the spirituality of our work. The first level is organizational and the second is individual. This section will identify ways to shape an organizational culture that reflects spiritual principles. The next section will share different strategies for staff development that focus on enhancing an individual's spiritual journey and the collective spiritual development of staff.

Strategies for shaping an organizational culture.

In our first two sections, we have described the role of soul work in the development of spirituality and how the student affairs culture that hinder the development of our staffs' spiritual lives. If we were to create a living community that supports spiritual practice and development we would need to shift our culture from one of a fragmented, treadmill to one that encourages reflection, caring, community and integration. Here are some concepts or strategies that would help develop a culture in student affairs that would support a living community. When we use the term "living community" we define it as a place that gives energy instead of draining it. It fulfills and sustains the life of the group itself, and the members in it. The members of a living community recognize and act on the principle of interdependence and treat each other as sacred.

- **An environment of safety.** If people don't feel safe at work, they don't reveal themselves. Over time, this diminishes their spiritual development, authenticity, and integrity. Russ Moxely, in his book, *Leadership and Spirituality* discusses the role of collusion and its negative impact on an individual's spiritual development². He believes that control-based hierarchies arise from the unexamined emotional issues of positional managers. If managers are driven by approval, fear, insecurity, or anger they are more controlling of people who report to them. For example, if a vice president were worried about gaining the approval of the president, he or she would need to control the outcomes and behaviors of their staff in order to deliver what the president wants. The impact of this behavior would trigger another dynamic between staff and the VP. If they didn't feel it was safe to disagree, they would need to choose between collusion and commitment. If they collude, they would say yes when they really wanted to say no, or remain silent when they want to speak their minds. When staff members choose collusion over commitment to their own authenticity and the institution's mission, their spirits are diminished. Therefore, it is important to create a culture of safety within student affairs, and influence the larger institution to do the same.
- **Design reasonable jobs.** Many organizations, including student affairs, today design job descriptions that are impossible for one person to do. However, overloading a job description has negative implications for spiritual development of staff members. From a staff member's perspective, having a job no one individual can complete adds to the frenetic doing-ness behavior of our work lives. Spiritual development needs time for reflection and "being" not just doing. A good place to start is with job descriptions that are "do-able" and have expectations for reflection built into them.

² *Leadership and Spirit: Breathing New Vitality and Energy into Individuals and Organizations*, Russ S. Moxley, Jossey-Bass publishers, Sna Francisco 2000

- **Develop spiritual "smoke alarms."** When we are so overworked that we become burnt out, we cannot be present to each other. When there are signs of burnout among staff, it is a symptom of a larger problem in the culture of the organization. Living communities have mechanisms to help people who need additional support to get their jobs done or work through life's challenges. Employee assistance programs can provide this support, or the help can come from colleagues who show concern or step in to help a task get accomplished. Other organizations actually use burnout as a badge of quality of performance, an opportunity to pile more work on the individual, or even to take advantage of the weaknesses that show up under stress. Organizations who pay attention to early warnings of burnout can intervene in a helpful and life supporting way. For example, a director's staff group decided to become a support vehicle for each other by watching for early signs of over work, sharing their perceptions with each other they offered encouragement and permission to change their behavior. Student affairs practitioners also need to examine their metaphors for work. For example, one dean of students thought September was the start of a marathon that ended with graduation the following spring. Our metaphors can shape our own expectations of what life is supposed to be like, and often they can conflict with our spiritual journeys.
- **Shift criteria for performance appraisals.** Many of our performance reviews ask us to identify what we have accomplished. The assumption behind the form is that the more you can list, the higher you will be rated. Shifting the criteria we use for evaluations can be a leveraged way to change your organization's culture. Criteria that support spiritual development by staff members include assessing one's personal development, developing reflective practices, and creating authenticity in relationships.
- **Treat others as sacred.** What would happen if we treated each other as if we are worthy of reverence and respect and were willing to show appreciation and consideration to others? How would this change what we talk about, how we interact, and what we believe about each other? Today, the lean and mean paradigm of organizations leaves little room for treating each other as sacred. However, if we chose to set a new standard of sacredness for our relationships, we would be creating a culture that supports the spiritual development of our staff. Something wonderful happens when we recognize the strengths and unique gifts in each other. We begin to reveal ourselves instead of protect ourselves. Our egos may then take a back seat, and we become more open and receptive to change, ideas, suggestions, and appreciation.
- **Pay attention to what you do and become more intentional in your actions.** Our behavior impacts those around us, especially if we are in a position of leadership. When we hold a management position, we are metaphorically in the spotlight to our employees. Others watch us more closely and use our actions as justification for their own behaviors. A leader's behavior elicits responses in others and effects the environment of an organization. When a manager behaves with integrity and authenticity, others are given permission to be authentic as well. The modeling of the leader helps to create a climate of honesty and integrity within the organization. Being trusting and trustworthy invites others to trust in return. This allows people to talk frankly with each other and helps authenticity and integrity to develop. When we

are present to others, they feel appreciated and can slow people and live more in the present. When a leader displays humor and enjoyment, it allows others to see humor in their own behaviors. Laughter opens people up to positive feelings and can diminish judgement and negative feelings.

Strategies for staff development

Shaping organizational culture can be enhanced through staff development. It is the leader's role to facilitate opportunities for staff development and change the paradigm of staff development. Below are some ways an individual can help facilitate spiritual development of their staff.

- **Centering before staff meetings.** Often we come into staff meetings with the thoughts and tasks we have left behind. This foreground keeps us from focusing on the present, each other, and the larger topics that form the connections between us. Centering is a technique that helps people let go of their foreground and focus on the meeting. In some ways, it allows our various molecules to catch up with our rapid movement from our individual offices to the staff meeting. Centering can come in the form of quiet, a reading, a prayer, or storytelling.
- **Reading groups.** Informal reading groups using spiritual books and articles can give staff members the opportunity to delve deeper into their own spiritual journey. Reading groups bring people who are exploring together with a structured reading. They chose the amount of reading required for each time and left time to discuss their individual insights, questions, or different reactions. Groups often meet over a meal, such as lunch or breakfast.
- **Busy person's retreat.** This is an individually structured week where a staff member agrees to take three 30-minute breaks each day for meditation, spiritual guidance, and quiet. The length of the retreat can vary, but usually a one-week time frame is used. The concept of using retreats to further spiritual growth is found in various monastic traditions. The breaks in a week enable you to slow down, take time to reflect on your life, and be nurtured in your own spiritual journey. This can be life changing. For example one student affairs staff development program used the busy person's retreat annually each January. The campus ministry office, in cooperation with a local monastery organized the program. Each person spent 30 minutes in meditation or prayer (their choice which). The next 30 minutes was spent sharing prayers with the sisters, and the third 30 minute time block was spent talking with a spiritual guide / director. The staff members who experienced this program said that it gave them a new perspective on their job and their lives. They were also able to be more present to their students and colleagues.
- **Celebrations.** Celebrations and rituals have a long tradition in religious organizations. As student affairs practitioners, we are often in the role of maintaining or initiating celebrations for students. However, we rarely see ourselves as one of the constituents we should plan celebrations for. Celebrations provide a breathing space to enjoy the present and focus on our strengths. They often give us hope and strength against challenging times ahead.

- **Sabbaticals or administrative leaves.** Most spiritual traditions have a practice of going on a journey or pilgrimage to deepen faith development. In higher education we have the practice of sabbaticals for faculty and sometimes for administrative staff. Taking advantage of these "time-outs" would have a positive effect on a person's spiritual growth. When we shift our pace to one of reflection, following a passion or researching an interest can have residual spiritual impact on our lives.
- **Retreats.** Many student affairs organizations have retreats for all or some part of their staff. Often our retreats are just another form of a meeting, only longer. We overload an agenda with too many topics and issues that need attention or decisions to be made. However, retreats can also be a powerful vehicle in the support of spiritual development. When we used retreats for this purpose, we include time for reflection, fun, and celebrations.
- **Reflection time.** In student affairs, our cultural bias is one of action and we are often judged institutionally [as well as justify our value to others] on how much we do. Therefore, giving permission and creating spaces for reflection can make a counter-culture statement that the organization values being as well as doing. One campus has a reflection room in their student center where staff, faculty, and students can go to be quiet. Another organization created interruption free time zones (IFTZ) of two hours per week for all staff. During these times, staff members could not schedule meetings, take calls, or answer emails. They used the time to, think, reflect, and spontaneously visit and build relationships with each other. IFTZ create a small patch of slow time where internal stimulation and integration can be supported and achieved.
- **Staff Service Days.** Participating as a staff in service activities in the community, reminds us that we are related to people beyond the campus. One's spiritual life can be nurtured by serving others. Not only does it set a good example to our students; it brings spiritual principles into visible action. Projects like Habitat for Humanity or urban plunges allows a social justice orientation to evolve in our staff and ourselves.
- **Outdoor experiences.** Many people experience the outdoors as a spiritual dimension. When we hike a mountain together, canoe down a river, sit side by side at a campfire, we use the natural spiritual connection with these activities to enhance our own connection with each other, nature, and our spirits.

These are a few ways we can enhance the spiritual development of our staff. They are not designed to be complete, and we expect as our readers experiment with spiritual staff development activities new and innovative ideas will emerge.

How Enhancing the Spiritual Capacity of Staff Impacts Student Development

Through the cultivation of the spiritual growth of each student affairs staff person, the individual in our workplace become stronger and more centered speaking and acting from core values. These voices of authenticity will raise the conversation above the level of everyday management headaches that tend to bog us down in details and forget the reasons we went into this work to begin with. These individual voices can become a

chorus creating a pocket of energy within our divisions attracting others who want to stay connected to the importance of student affairs work.

Not only have we created healthier, happier staff members connected to our highest ideals, but we transform our divisions. As individuals have souls and do their own soul work, our division is enhanced from the inside out. As the individual staff person is more fulfilled and productive through spiritual growth the division is enhanced. It becomes a pocket of positive energy within the institution that students, faculty and other staff are attracted to. Partnerships are formed, relationships are enhanced and collaboration is fostered.

The goals of working across departmental boundaries are easier to achieve because there is more of a bridge to span these boundaries. Tapping into the values and aspirations of our staff enables communication among others who have similar hopes to build better learning environments for students. As a result student affairs becomes a more respected part of the institution called upon more often to provide leadership on key institutional objectives. The sense of worth of the staff is enhanced as is the reputation and respect for the division.

This is leadership through values. Connecting individuals to their own core values and to the core values of the institutions creates a common ground. In organizational cultures supportive of the spiritual journey of the individual, the growth of the organization is also enhanced. You might argue as Peter Senge has that an institution cannot go where its employees do not want to go³.

You might say that as student development staff develop their own habits of the heart we also nurture the heart of the institution. We are the ones called upon to interpret the mission of the institution in the midst of a campus crisis attracting media attention. In those times the real values of the college or university become clear. We are often called upon to make sense of an institutional policy decision that has packed the student government meeting or made headlines in the student paper. We are the architects of the organizational culture in the residence halls, athletic departments and student organizations. We may be the custodians of the collective soul of the campus.

As faculty seek to create a life of the mind in an academic institution to foster discussion, critical thinking and the abilities of students to communicate, student affairs staff are in key positions to nurture the habits of the heart of the institution. If we have done our job with professional development and given the staff a grounding in the common ground, it is not only our staff members who are developed, it is our student affairs divisions that are enhanced and our institutions as well.

³ *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, Peter Senge, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, Bryan J. Smith, Art Kleiner, Doubleday, New York, 1994.