

Review of Research on Spiritual and Religious Formation in Higher Education

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Abstract: College students have diverse ways of expressing their spirituality. The purpose of this review is to examine and critique the research used to study college students' spiritual and religious formation. Implications for faculty, student affairs professionals, and ministers doing research on spiritual formation in higher education are discussed.

The current generation of college students' spiritual and religious development is markedly different from that of previous generations as evidenced by their decreased church attendance and lack of identification with a particular denomination (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). However, "students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning and purpose of life" (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2005, Executive Summary, ¶ 4). College students report that a significant amount of their religious experiences and discussions occur with friends (78%), in nature (73%), and while listening to music (64%), or participating in athletic events (30%), meditating (30%), or viewing art (36%), which have not always been classified as religious experiences in past research (HERI, 2005). College students are spiritual and religious seekers that are less inclined to attend church as they progress through education, more inclined to talk to friends about their experiences and doubts, and likely to undergo a significant amount of psychic trauma as they develop (HERI, 2005; Hindman, 2002; Schafer, 1997; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). The purpose of this review is to examine and critique the research used to study college students' spiritual and religious formation.

Method

A review of the literature for a 9-year period was conducted. This period was chosen to encompass both the studies which define and measure college student spirituality and religiosity and well as the most current research of college students' spirituality and religiosity (HERI, 2006; Shafer, 1997; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). The descriptors used were students' religious life, conversion, higher education, and spirituality. The studies were selected from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* *Journal of College and Character*, and *Religious Education*, and two additional studies were chosen from ERIC, for a total of 11 research studies. An analysis of the research method of each study was conducted based on a critique of the research design, data collection method, data analysis, and results of the research.

Discussion

The Higher Education Research Institute (2005) at the University of California at Los Angeles has initiated a multi-year mixed model longitudinal study of college students' search for meaning and purpose. The most recent phase of the study is based on a survey administered to a representative sample of 112,000 college freshmen at 240 colleges and universities in the fall of 2004. This survey was followed by a qualitative component "designed to assess the spiritual life of college students in more depth by conducting individual and focus group interviews" (HERI, 2005, The Survey ¶ 3). The survey instrument was developed based on a pilot survey completed

in 2003. The survey was designed to be sensitive to religious affiliation, gender, political orientation and engagement, socioeconomic status, and spiritual quest. The survey and sample is silent on ethnicity, cultural diversity, and the unchurched (except to note the spectrum of more religious to less religious). The results are correlated to academic performance, degree aspirations, self-esteem, physical health, satisfaction with college, and psychological distress. The determinations of spirituality, physical health and psychological distress were self-rated. This study will continue with the same student population in the spring of 2007 (junior year) for longitudinal comparison. The resources applied to this study make it significant in the on-going study of college student spiritual formation; however, the limitations of sampling criteria make it less valuable for ethnically diverse and multi-cultural populations. The limits of survey complexity (even in a 4 page, 32 question format) leave gaps in the description of students' spiritual and religious experience and do not address the spiritual formation or needs of those who do not self-identify as religious.

Another national longitudinal study that is related to student spiritual and religious development and used by many of the subsequent studies is *College Students Helping America* (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2006). This study is often cited as evidence of increased student spirituality by virtue of increased student volunteerism. Drawn from the Current Population Survey of 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, this study reveals that the rate of volunteering by college students has risen 2002 to 2005 by 20%, over twice the increase of the adult population. Although the study states that its strength is in the size of the sample which "permits narrowly defined subpopulations" (p. 18), the research did not identify the demographics of any subpopulations except by age of the students.

Zinnbauer and Pargament's (1998) research is also a foundational study for much of the current research on college student spirituality in a mixed method design. Participants at a Midwestern state university were identified by a screening questionnaire about religious experience that identified Christian undergraduates (214) who had responded positively to the question: Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? The participants, who were then selected by a nonrandom process of being identified by teaching assistants as verbally skilled, were given research credit in psychology for participation in a more detailed survey and open-ended interview. The interview questions were designed by the researcher to "allow the students to tell their own story" (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998, 170). The results were analyzed on the basis of self-reported religious change over time. The initial hypothesis that students experiencing religious conversion would present with high psychological stress was moderately supported by the research. Correlations were made to gender, age, and class status. The study was silent on ethnic and multi-cultural populations and did not attempt to measure religious or spiritual experiences or psychological distress in students who did not self-identify as religious.

Genia (2001) published an evaluation of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzain & Ellison, 1982), with a religiously heterogeneous sample of college students. According to Genia, the scale is widely used in psychological study of religion, is not based on a specific religious orientation, and has been tested for consistency and construct validity. However, it has been found to be less reliable with use among evangelical Protestants (ceiling effect) and has not been verified with use in non-Protestant populations. The participants for this study were recruited by faculty, campus ministers, and residence hall assistants at American University in Washington, DC. Even with the attempt to identify a religiously heterogeneous sample, 47% of the respondents were not Protestant and 24% identified themselves as unaffiliated or non-Judeo-Christian. A new category was developed for the last group and identified as "nontraditionally

religious”(p.26). The sample was predominantly female (69%) and predominantly white (81%). Although the scales used were described in detail, as well as the measures used to analyze the data, the study does not describe how the scales were administered. The hypothesized ceiling effects were supported by the research in Christian respondents; however, the research on Jewish and nontraditional students was inconclusive. No attempt was made to isolate the data for the non-White respondents. The study supported the assumption that the results being measured by the Spiritual Well Being Scale are not reliable for most of the populations identified.

Winings (1999) summarizes a study of college students' response to the efficacy of campus ministry and religious groups. The researcher surveyed four religious groups (i.e., Protestant-Methodist, Catholic, Jewish, and Evangelical-Baptist) with personal interviews and a multi-page questionnaire. The sample criteria considered the geographic location of the respondent, gender, ethnicity, and type and size of the university. She also surveyed campus ministers and spiritual directors with the same criteria. The data was analyzed by religious group and student versus professional. The study results were described as a list of students' responses, resulting in specific recommendations including a service-learning program outline. The study findings included the students' lack of interest in denominationalism and their desire to learn in a service-oriented environment. The professionals were less forthcoming in their responses while the “students often wrote on the back of the page and on additional sheets” (Winings, 1999, 334).

McCrohan and Bernt (2004) utilized the Catholic Faith Inventory and the Religious Life Inventory at a Catholic university. This study differentiated between religion and spirituality and based on traditional worship and service models among groups identified as a service group, a worship group, and an uncommitted group. The service and worship group participants were identified by campus ministry, and the uncommitted group was drawn from the school's human subjects pool in a psychology class. A questionnaire was administered to the three groups and results were quantified based on sex, age, religious denomination (except for the uncommitted group), and year in school. The criteria were silent on ethnicity and culture of the participants. The findings were mixed and revealed that the “uncommitted group may not be accurately described and completely uninvolved, but rather not so intensely involved” as either of the other two groups (McCrohan & Brent, 2004, 282). Further findings indicated that the “values identified as important [by the students] was clearly a function of the specific values of the particular university and of the programs identified by the institution.” (p. 283).

Dalton, Eberhardt, and Echols (2006) attempt to identify “contemporary forms and patterns of student spirituality” (p.1) related to spiritual search using ethnographic methods of review of student blogs and content analysis of university websites regarding activities and course content on spirituality. The study was silent on sampling criteria. The student comments derived from online blogs was descriptive but unverifiable as to author and biographic make up. However, this study did attempt to be responsive to student-driven needs and expressions of spirituality in an open format, albeit loosely defined. The study was silent on how the blogs were derived and identified as spiritual in nature. The review of institutional spiritual content was taken from the institution's website and no attempt was described to verify the offerings or evaluate their efficacy. This study was most informative in illustrating the difficulty in identifying college students' spiritual development in an objective, verifiable method that provides for the wide range of spiritual definitions and practices.

Continuing on the topic of spirituality and service, Andolina, Meents-Decaigny, and Nass (2006) explored the relationship of civic engagement to spiritual attitudes. The study relied upon unspecified scales adapted from other national studies (the study cites the HERI study in other

places), and then compared the responses to other national studies. The survey was administered by email to all degree-seeking undergraduates at DePaul University. The survey results only weakly supported the hypothesis that students who placed a high value on religion or spirituality would also be more politically active. There was a relationship between religiosity and volunteering, but it did not extend to civic engagement such as voting, protesting, or petitioning.

Researchers at a medium-sized Midwestern Evangelical university studied student spirituality as expressed in three different intentional communities where students, and in some cases, faculty have chosen to live out a life of daily prayer, shared meals, and service to the immediate neighborhood (Mulder, Bouman, Marion, & DeBraaf, 2006). This ethnographic study was conducted by means of telephone interviews to 45 participants selected through snowball sampling for two of the communities and random sampling for the third community. The respondents (almost equally divided between men and women) had lived in one of three intentional communities existing at the college during different periods from 1971 to the present. The interviews focused on the students' experiences living in poor neighborhoods and interacting with the community, rather than on the students' own spiritual development. Therefore, the findings are negatively skewed to the students who did not have a positive experience interacting with the neighborhood or did not feel that they were effective in the neighborhood. When the respondents focused on their own spiritual development, however, the responses were overwhelming positive with regard to the growth the students' experienced by living in community and how this growth was either enhanced or limited by the involvement of the mentors and the institution. The generalizability of the study is limited due to the convenience sampling and the small sample size. However, the findings do indicate that intentional community is a viable option for student spiritual development, especially when the concept is supported and fostered by the institution administration and faculty.

Another model of intentional community was presented in a Jesuit university setting by Calderwood (2005). The qualitative study reviewed a sample of students, staff, and faculty at a foundation-funded residential learning community which houses 130 students representing 25% of the sophomore class called Ignatian Residential College (IRC). The ethnographic research utilized interviews with students, staff, and faculty, surveys and other media such as student essays, bulletin boards, website, and artwork within the community. The findings had a number of implications for current and future structure and development of the IRC which has been deemed an overall success in its first two years of operation. One interesting finding was that with no intentional diversity criteria, the IRC population had a higher percentage of African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students than the campus average. These students indicated that they were drawn to the community concept to establish relationships that had eluded them in their first year on campus. All students reported a need for community and connection as primary criteria for choosing the IRC. It should be noted that the institutional goal for the IRC is to develop student leaders in this intense environment that will then return to the general population and no attempt is made to identify students who may have spiritual and development needs that would be best served in the intentional community environment

Implications

Research in college student spiritual and religious development is evolving in an attempt to quantify and describe the changing nature of how students define, express, and search for spiritual and religious meaning. The HERI (2006) study provides a platform for some of the research, but important sampling and design questions are raised in a number of the studies researched.

Sampling criteria relied upon students self-identifying as religious or students were selected by campus ministers. In large quantitative studies the sampling could be better controlled by first establishing objective criteria for religiosity for use in screening participants.

Within the participant pool the demographics are heavily weighted towards white, Midwestern Protestants, especially if total sample size in all studies is considered. United States college demographics should be studied to determine how to select a sample that includes ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. The studies reveal the diminishing role of denominationalism among college students, and this trend should be honored in the research.

Quantitative research has dominated the literature on college student spirituality until the last three years when ethnographic research has begun to appear. Future research methods need to take into account the innate complexity and individuation of the exploration of religious and spiritual issues and to allow for new expressions of the religion and spirituality on the part of students. Ethnographic research, including participant-observer research, would offer the flexibility needed to capture the specific and distinct descriptions and manners of expression of student spiritual development (Adler & Adler, 1994).

Current research on college student spirituality focuses primarily on those students who self-identify as spiritual or religious and ignores the reality that spiritual formation is the pursuit of personal identity, making it problematic for many students to self-identify as subjects for research. Most of the studies did not consider the unchurched in the sample or data analysis until that population surfaced as problematic for the research. Since the student population is redefining religious expression as something that may occur outside the church itself, the unchurched student must be specifically identified as a discreet participant group and studied in a wide variety of settings. In any comprehensive approach to spirituality that takes place outside the church building the students' residential environment must be considered. Intentional and learning communities are an excellent starting point for future ethnographic and participant-observer research (Adler & Adler, 1994).

What once was thought to be a distinct rebellion against religion by our youth is now identified as a paradigm shift in an engaged and questing generation that is overtly spiritual (Dalton, 2006). What an exciting time in the college student community to initiate research that is not only revelatory but transformational.

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