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Spirituality in emerging adults: Lessons from the national study of youth and religion

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SERIES

Working on Our Inner Lives: Meaning-Making in Colleges and Universities—Series Part III

Spirituality in Emerging Adults: Lessons from the National Study of Youth and Religion

A Review of Current Research

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The Commission for Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning is pleased to offer ACPA members an opportunity to engage in reflection and meaning-making regarding issues of spirituality, faith, religion, and belief in higher education and student affairs. "Working on Our Inner Lives: Meaning-Making in Colleges and Universities" is a four-part series intended to feature research snapshots, best practices, and personal narratives of faculty, staff, and students regarding spirituality, faith, religion, meaning, and existentialism in higher education generally and particularly affecting our work with students.

As conversation continues about the role spirituality plays in the development of college students, it is important for student affairs professionals to be cognizant of what empirical research can tell them about spiritual growth.¹ Although Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2010) work is quickly becoming well-known, prior research from scholars in other disciplines has also made contributions to this discussion. For example, during the last decade, Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, has led the National Study of Youth and Religion. Given the robust mixed-methods design that consisted of thousands of survey responses and hundreds of interviews, Smith and Snell (2009) maintain that their research project is "the most comprehensive and reliable understanding and explanation of the lives of emerging adults in the United States today" (p. 9). This article reviews this research and explains how it may help student affairs professionals guide students toward spiritual growth.

FROM THE EDITOR

Start a Dialogue with *Developments*

COMMENTARIES

A Response to "The Ethics of Professional Involvement & Development"

Educating the Whole Student: Furthering the Dialogue

SERIES: WORKING ON OUR INNER LIVES (PART III)

Different Settings, Different Meanings: The Role of Institutional Context—Introduction and Discussion Questions for Part III

Incorporating Religious Traditions into Moral Education: The Case of Christian Colleges and Universities

Spirituality in Emerging Adults: Lessons from the National Study of Youth and Religion

PERSPECTIVES

Strengthening Partnerships: The Native American Network, ACPA, and the Field of Native American Student Affairs

NEXT GENERATION

How Graduate Preparation Faculty Help Students "Be More"

FEATURE COLUMNS

Global Affairs: Understanding the Core of the Campus Experience: How Global Engagements Help Us Better Understand Local Context

Ethical Issues: Is Ethics Only About Punishment?

Legal Issues: Conceal Carry and College Student Gun Ownership

The first phase of Smith's study was conducted from 2001 to 2005. During this time he surveyed more than 3,000 of America's teenagers (ages 13-17) and conducted follow-up interviews with over 250 of the participants. The findings can be found in *Soul Searching* (Smith & Denton, 2005), a book that disproves many stereotypes about youth and religion, such as the notion that a majority of teens are alienated or rebellious when it comes to spiritual involvement. Smith conducted another study on the same group five years later, when they reached the ages of traditional college students (ages 18-23). The resulting book, *Souls in Transition* (Smith & Snell, 2009), also dispels some myths like the idea that faith declines in the majority of college students. The findings demonstrate that the largest proportion of traditionally-aged college students tend not to change in their spiritual interest or commitment from their early teenage years and it actually increases for a small percentage of them.

Student affairs professionals have much to learn from the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion. For one, the study reaffirms the notion of emerging adulthood as a new life phase. According to psychologist Jeffery Arnett (2004), *emerging adulthood* is more than an in-between phase bookended by high school and the "real world." Rather, it is an independent stage of life characterized by "intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self . . . and unparalleled hope" (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 6). Smith and Snell (2009) describe how four macro changes in American society led to the creation of emerging adulthood: (a) the rapid growth of enrollment in higher education, (b) the delay of marriage for young adults, (c) low job security and subsequent frequent job changes, and (d) the extension of parental financial support to children at older ages. These four social changes provide emerging adults with unprecedented freedom from traditional social expectations. Indeed, Smith and Snell note that emerging adults "are determined to be free. But they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom" (p. 294).

Due to the lack of direction emerging adults experience with regard to their increased freedom, the results from the National Study of Youth and Religion offer potential ways for student affairs professionals to help college students develop meaning and purpose in life. For example, higher levels of spiritual commitment correlate with more positive outcomes in relationships, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences for emerging adults (Smith & Snell, 2009). In short, their research shows that the way emerging adults make meaning affects decisions for many important aspects of life. As adolescents, individual family households and religious congregations have the greatest impact on spiritual development (Smith & Denton, 2005). But as adolescents become emerging adults, higher education institutions have the potential to shape this development in powerful ways.

The work of student affairs professionals should take into account the context within which they work when determining how to promote spiritual development. The faith-based missions of sectarian institutions may allow for student affairs professionals to do this work more explicitly. However, such work can and should also occur on the campuses of non-sectarian institutions that are publicly supported. For instance, data from the National Study of Youth and Religion was used to create a typology of spirituality for emerging adults. The six types are: (1) Committed

UPDATES, NEWS, & ANNOUNCEMENTS

From One Dupont Circle: Quarterly Update

From the President: Proving our Worth

Commissions Corner (NEW)

ACPA Annual Convention 2012

Clarification for Summer 2011 Issue: Global Affairs Column

Traditionalists, (2) Selective Adherents, (3) Spiritually Open, (4) Religiously Indifferent, (5) Religiously Disconnected, and (6) Irreligious (Smith & Snell, 2009). Student affairs professionals will find all six types of students on virtually every college campus, although specific campuses may attract more of one type than others. If student affairs professionals understand where their students are spiritually and are aware of the culture of their individual campuses, they will be better equipped to promote spiritual interest and commitment.

Smith and Snell (2009) identify two distinct areas that have the greatest impact on spiritual development, and these broad categories can be translated to fit the mission of any campus. First, research findings demonstrate that outward spiritual practices do influence inner spiritual formation. Therefore, student affairs professionals can provide opportunities for meaning-making and individual reflection with the goal of influencing inner spiritual formation. This kind of work may be especially timely in light of President Obama's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge (Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, n.d.). Second, Smith and Snell's research emphasizes the powerful role non-parental adults play in the lives of emerging adults. As Parks (2000) observed, "higher education serves—consciously or unconsciously—as a mentoring environment for the re-formation of meaning and faith" (p. 172). With awareness and intention, student affairs professionals can and do serve as such mentors.

Although many emerging adults may or may not take initiative in their own spiritual development, they are surprisingly open to initiative, interest, and investment by others. Emerging adults know that there is more to life than what many of them have discovered and they desire help in understanding the "more." Through direct mentorship and the creation of opportunities to explore meaning and purpose, student affairs professionals can help emerging adults develop spiritually in ways that fit the context and mission of any campus.

Discussion Questions

- Where do you think most students on your campus are in terms of their spiritual interest and commitment? Consider utilizing Smith and Snell's (2009) typology as a good starting point.
- Research demonstrates that outward practices do influence inner spiritual formation. What opportunities can your campus provide for students to practice their faith and spiritual commitment?
- Research shows that non-parental adults, such as student affairs professionals, play a powerful role in the spiritual development of emerging adults. Moreover, students in this life phase hesitate to take initiative in their spiritual development but are open to the initiative taken by others. How can student affairs professionals serve as "spiritual guides" on your campus in ways that align with the mission of the institution?

Notes

¹ The terms “growth” and “development” are used synonymously in this article.

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About the Author

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[Back to Top](#)

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