The Challenge and Promise of Pluralism: Dimensions of Spiritual Climate and Diversity at a Lutheran College

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Spirituality and religion have recently gained a renewed interest in higher education. In fact, Nash (2001) suggests that there “appears to be a virtually insatiable need for religious exploration in the academy” (p. 3) and that this revival of interest in spirituality and religion represents the most vibrant aspect of pluralism on campuses today. Whatever the reason for this surge in spiritual interest, many professionals in higher education are taking notice and attempting to discern how, if at all, to engage students, faculty, and staff in discussions of spirituality and religion.

One of many challenges in opening religious and spiritual dialogues on college campuses is the reality that dialogues of this nature, while steeped in educational potential, also present
opportunities for discord and controversy to surface. It is imperative, then, to approach such dialogues with sensitivity and with full awareness of the existing institutional dynamics and diversity climate. Understanding the immediate climatic environment of a particular campus enables educators and administrators to tailor opportunities for engagement across lines of worldview difference in a way that is attuned and responsive to the needs and inclinations of members of the campus community. This study sought to explicate relevant features of the spiritual climate at one liberal arts religious college and also highlight the diverse ways in which students, faculty, and staff identities shaped the experience of climate. Our study was guided by a framework that integrates research on gendered and racial/ethnic dimensions of campus climate, as well as recent efforts to explore the implications of collegiate religious and spiritual climates.

**Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity**

According to Strange and Banning (2001), components of the campus environment include physical, human aggregate, organizational, and constructed elements. These components of the environment have been studied extensively in recent years via frameworks designed to probe the nuances of campus diversity climates. According to Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999), the climate for diversity is a function of four interrelated elements: (a) the institution’s history of inclusion/exclusion of particular groups; (b) structural diversity (i.e., the proportional representation of diverse groups on campus); (c) opportunities for (and quality of) engagement with diversity (behavioral climate); and (d) individual perceptions of, attitudes toward, and experiences with, the environment (psychological climate). To date, scholars who have explored these essential dimensions have placed particular emphasis on the extent to which campus structures, policies, and individual attitudes and behaviors are inclusive of racial/ethnic minorities; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people; and individuals with disabilities (Flowers, 2004; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Mayhew, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006; Pascarella et al. 1997; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Rankin,
More specifically, the range of dimensions that studies have considered include the racial/ethnic/gender composition of the campus (Mayhew et al., 2006); the campus’s psychological climate (Mayhew et al.); the degree of intergroup tensions (Hurtado, 1992); the presence of microaggressions, harassment, prejudice, and discrimination (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000); pressures to conceal one’s identity (Rankin, 2005); and the representation, or lack thereof, of marginalized groups in the curriculum (Rankin).

The impact of diversity—namely racial/ethnic diversity—on cognitive and affective student outcomes has also been widely studied; the findings of this line of research clearly support the notion that experiences with diversity have promising developmental implications for students (Gurin, Dey, Gurin, & Hurtado, 2004). By contrast, environments that are chilly or hostile are detrimental to students’ sense of belonging (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008), adjustment (Mounts, 2004), and self-confidence (Hall and Sandler, 1982), and may even encourage risky behaviors such as binge drinking (Mounts). There is also evidence to suggest that the negative effects of hostile climates are problematic for minority and majority groups alike (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). In the face of hostile climates, however, some students resist negativity and seek positive changes in the campus environment (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Effective improvement of the campus climate for diversity necessitates both centralized and decentralized strategies that employ multiple diversity levers such as institutional/departmental mission statements and strategic plans attuned to diversity, systemic efforts to reward and encourage integration of diversity, and leadership that is knowledgeable about complex diversity issues (Williams, 2006). A multipronged approach involving small initiatives integrated across campus can contribute to an inclusive climate for the institution as a whole (Clements, 1999). Moreover, institutional assessments of campus climate followed by genuine consideration and implementation of the findings are critical to fostering a welcoming campus environment (Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998).
Dimensions of religious, spiritual, and worldview diversity have been conspicuously absent from the extant research literature on campus climate despite the fact that, within the broader global context, religious conflict is deeply concerning (Eck, 2001; Omar, 2005; ter Harr & Busuttil, 2005). Though what we know about religious and spiritual dimensions of campus climate is limited, we do know that students’ perceptions of the quality of campus environments (related to academically and socially supportive out-of-class environments; relationships among faculty, students, and administrators; and overall satisfaction with college) are associated with spirituality and liberal learning outcomes (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). Moreover, Kuh and Gonyea note that opportunities for students to encounter spirituality during college “may even have mildly salutary effects on engagement in educationally purposeful activities and desired outcomes of college” (p. 46). It has also become evident in recent years that students’ engagement with spirituality and religion has assumed a voluntary quality; compared to eras past, religion and spirituality are rarely a mandated aspect of college life (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001).

A few recent studies have highlighted how students of various spiritual and/or religious worldviews experience campus environments. In a study investigating the perceptions and experiences of seven women who veiled on a large college campus in the Midwest, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) discovered that female Muslim students endured prevalent misconceptions and alienating stereotypes held by others. Most of these students described encountering social and academic isolation and blatant discrimination. Researchers have also found that some evangelical Christian students feel stereotyped and largely misunderstood by others on campus (e.g., Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Magolda & Ebben, 2006; Moran, Lang, & Oliver, 2007; Schulz, 2005). Beyond the relatively small repertoire of national and single-institution research studies, some have written extensively, using anecdotal and professional expertise, on how to reap the benefits of religious pluralism in the classroom (Nash, 2001) and beyond it (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008). Nash (2001) affirmed that higher education personnel need to “enlarge their understanding of pluralism to
include open, challenging, spiritually, and educationally revitalizing conversations about genuine religious difference” (p. 4).

Laurence (1999) aptly summarized a dilemma faced by educators in all types of higher education institutions by asking, “How can we create campus cultures that validate and support the religious elements in the lives of students from a wide variety of traditions?” (p. 11). The Education as Transformation Project (Laurence) was conceived in order to explore the ways in which colleges and universities were dealing with religious diversity among their students. In a 1998 national gathering of individuals involved and/or interested in this initiative, the capacity of institutions to thoroughly engage religious diversity was cast as a systemic need requiring investment across all levels of an institution. Eck (1993) encouraged higher education personnel to focus on religious pluralism rather than religious diversity. In her opinion, pluralism is not the sheer fact of religious diversity alone, but rather, is active engagement with that diversity. This implies going beyond simply tolerating the existence of various spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices. Kazanjian stated, “[W]e must move beyond tolerance through a relational process in which we come to know each other and each other’s traditions and move slowly toward a sense of interdependence” (as cited in Laurence, 1999, p. 16). To be sure, the challenge is daunting, but the promising implications of engaging pluralism are worth pursuing.

As religious diversity on college campuses becomes increasingly evident, scholars and practitioners are seeking to navigate the complexities of pluralism and utilize spiritual differences as an invaluable resource to further student learning and development. To understand the process by which religious diversity impacts campus climate and, subsequently, members of the campus community, this case study explored the spiritual climate of a liberal arts, Lutheran-identified institution with an espoused intention to welcome students, faculty, and staff from diverse faith traditions. In an effort to enumerate the features and challenges of an institution with a complex blend of worldviews and needs, we sought answers to the following questions:

(a) What are the core dimensions of the Lutheran College spiritual climate? and (b) How do members of the Lutheran College community experience the spiritual climate of their institution in light of their diverse identities?
Method

Description of the Case

Lutheran College is a small, Midwestern, Lutheran institution devoted to providing students with a residential liberal arts undergraduate experience, supportive connections to faculty and peers, spiritual enrichment, and opportunities to explore one’s calling. The college is located in a small town with a population under 10,000. The campus itself is comprised of approximately 1,800 students and has a student-faculty ratio of 12–1. Demographically, the student population is 53 percent female, 7% ethnic minority, and 5% international. Although 41% of the student body is Lutheran, 25% are Catholic, and the remaining proportion consists of a combination of other Christian denominations, non-Christian faiths, and nonreligious worldviews. Affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the campus strikes a fine balance between reflecting its denominational identity and serving the needs of multiple religious/spiritual perspectives represented on campus.

Several years ago Lutheran College secured grant funding to focus on fostering purpose, leadership, and service in the vocational and spiritual lives of students, faculty, and staff. Specifically, the college developed intentional programming to provide opportunities for reflection on the intersections of faith and career choice, involvement in experiential learning (e.g., internships and service-learning), formation of mentoring relationships, and consideration of vocations in ministry. One of the more recent phases of their initiative involved an assessment of the college’s spiritual climate and campus ministry programming. At the time of the study, campus ministry was led by two ordained Lutheran campus pastors in conjunction with a student campus ministry board on which were representatives from approximately 12 faith expression groups (e.g., Adopt-A-Grandparent, Fellowship of Christian Athletes). We were invited to conduct this assessment as external researcher-consultants and collaborated with campus leaders to design a study with the dual purpose of informing the campus community and contributing to scholarship on the spiritual experiences of students, staff, and faculty at religious colleges. Prior to data collection, we worked in conjunction with
campus leaders to “foreshadow” (Stake, 2005) issues that would be pertinent to understanding the spiritual climate of the college and the needs of various campus constituencies.

*Study Design*

We employed ethnographic techniques of data collection, including interviews, focus groups, and observations, to generate an in-depth, “thick” description of Lutheran College’s spiritual climate. A case study with ethnographic features is an apt descriptor of the design.

*Sampling*

In January 2007, a general invitation e-mail was sent to students, faculty, and staff at Lutheran College requesting their participation in the study. Faculty and staff had the opportunity to participate in an interview, while students were invited to participate in either a focus group or an interview. (We felt that one-on-one interviews with faculty and staff were the most appropriate context for eliciting honest responses on issues that were personal and related to spirituality. Given their status as employees of the college, confidentiality was of utmost importance for this group.) The data gleaned from the survey assisted in ensuring maximum variation (diversity) in the sample (Merriam, 2002). In total, the perspectives of 55 students, 11 faculty, and 11 staff were incorporated into the study.

*Data Collection*

During visits to the campus, we interviewed students, faculty, and staff and observed several campus ministry events. Student focus groups shed light on students’ perceptions of the campus’s spiritual climate, as well as of campus ministry programming. Whereas the focus groups were intended to gauge general perceptions of the institutional climate and culture that students encountered, reflections on personal experiences and spiritual journeys were reserved for one-on-one interviews with students. The faculty and staff interviews served the dual purpose of learning how these individuals perceived the spiritual landscape of the campus in
general and of the campus ministry program in particular, as well as how they viewed their work (e.g., meaningful, stressful, joyful) and their own spiritual lives and needs. In addition to focus groups and interviews, observations of two chapel services and two Sunday services served as supplemental sources of contextual data.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection, all focus group and interview recordings were transcribed. From these, a list of codes was developed and used to systematically sift the data into units of meaning. These units of meaning were then reconstructed into themes and patterns essential to understanding the college’s spiritual climate and the ways in which individual spiritualities and identities intersected these climatic dimensions. In effect, the process was one of tearing down and rebuilding into an organized and meaningful interpretation of the case (Creswell, 1998). Over the course of the analysis, codes were revised, patterns and their exceptions were identified, theories were tested, and through the process of writing, the pieces were put together in a unified and descriptive framework.

Researcher Perspectives, Validity, and Ethical Concerns

Qualitative research involves acknowledging the lenses we have adopted in order to be transparent about the ways in which the data may be affected by our perspectives. As external researcher-consultants, we bring to this study the perspectives of “outsiders” who are familiar with college environments as professors of higher education/student affairs at two public research universities. We are both middle class, Caucasian women, affiliated with non-Lutheran Christian traditions. One of us identifies as a feminist who has conducted research on campus-based religious organizations from this critical standpoint.

We invoked several strategies to enhance the validity and reliability of the data (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation ensured credibility of the findings across multiple informants (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) and data collection methods (i.e., interviews, focus groups, and observations). During the data collection phase,
we achieved data saturation by seeking discrepant, diverse points of view and continuing the data collection until themes became generally repetitious. We also conducted member checks to verify findings with various constituencies on the campus. By soliciting feedback on initial findings from the Lutheran College community, we were able to hone and refine our conclusions. A dependability audit trail (Mertens, 2005) was established by documenting all research decisions, activities, and changes throughout the course of the project and maintaining organized files of all interview transcripts, observation documents, and data charts. Finally, thick description enhances the transferability of our data from the Lutheran College context to other similar contexts with which the reader is familiar (Mertens).

**Findings**

One of the primary objectives of this exploration of the Lutheran College campus was to understand the ways in which individual spiritualities interfaced with Lutheran College’s spiritual landscape. To uncover the nuances of the institutional context and individual experiences within it, we invited study participants to describe the campus’s spiritual climate and forms of spiritual expression they witnessed in the lives of faculty, staff, and students. We were attentive to how participants perceived the climate and also explored how participants experienced their own identities within the Lutheran College context.

**Dimensions of Lutheran College’s Spiritual Climate**

*Visible and Voluntary Spirituality*

Faculty and staff were demonstrably conscious of the infusion of spirituality into the campus culture. One faculty member noted, “It’s a part of our community, so you have a heightened awareness of it. You’re introduced to it when you first come here to Lutheran College.” Others indicated that faith “has been woven into the fabric of the institution” and also that “the discussion around religion and faith is very prevalent on our campus.” The spiritually infused culture was in no way formulaic or compulsory. On the contrary, faculty and staff conveyed that individuals were
free to express themselves in ways that were personally meaningful and relevant. A staff member illustrated the dual nature of the spiritual-but-voluntary campus ethos by observing, on the one hand, “You very much know that faith is a part of our mission statement; it’s a part of the college campus,” and, on the other hand, “It’s not forced down anybody’s throat by any means.”

Confirming the general openness to spirituality that was tempered by individual choice, one faculty member explained, “Clearly this is a place where you could feel very comfortable in serving and expressing your faith. Some people wear it on their sleeve and some people don’t, so it just depends on who you are.” Students, too, commented on the freedom of expression they experienced. One student reported the ease with which religious identity could be openly shared: “I think they’re open with talking about it. I think that all students and staff are willing to share their views. You can just be totally open with, ‘yes, I’m a Christian,’ or ‘no, I’m a Mormon.’” Others appreciated the opportunity for spiritual engagement—and having a choice about whether to do so: “It [religion] is available if you want it. This isn’t a college that forces religion on anybody. It’s just there.”

**Diverse Spiritual Expressions**

The ways in which individuals chose to express themselves spiritually varied tremendously. This diversity reflected the plethora of faith-related opportunities—structured and unstructured—available on the campus. Whereas some individuals expressed themselves spiritually in the context of structured campus ministry programming aligned with the Lutheran tradition or fervent student-led initiatives associated with the evangelical Christian movement, others opted for alternate avenues of spiritual expression. In the classroom (typically within the humanities and religious studies disciplines) and during informal interactions between students and faculty or staff, religious or spiritual conversations were not uncommon. Although faculty and staff were generally careful to avoid indoctrination of students, much of the motivation to engage in spiritual or religious discussions stemmed from faculty and staff perceptions that:
One of our responsibilities is to try to encourage students to examine their faith and to help them appreciate and understand that to challenge your faith is a strength of your faith, not a sign of weakness. . . . We live in an environment where we take seriously, presumably, the need to challenge our surroundings, both intellectually and otherwise, and the examination and constant reexamination of our faith should be very much part of that, and that’s certainly consistent with the Lutheran tradition.

Other forms of spiritual expression included outward manifestations of faith convictions that ranged from wearing religious clothing or symbols to service and acting to promote social justice. To illustrate these active forms of spiritual expression, a staff-member explained:

I think the greatest way that members of our campus express their spirituality/religion/faith is through everyday acts of service. With our foundation resting in the Lutheran Church, service is at the forefront as well as the belief that others will know what you stand for through your actions. Faith is to be lived, and there is no greater testimony than for your behavior to reflect what you believe. Actions speak louder than words.

Although spiritual expressions were an evident component of campus life, a segment of the student population was demonstrably more secular—at least on the surface—and did not attach importance to spiritual expression or involvement with campus ministry programming. One student’s reflection captures the sentiments of the spiritually disengaged:

It’s kind of nice not to have anybody care about faith . . . to have people kind of keep it separate. . . . You’d hope that it’s stuff that people are doing, but really people probably just don’t care. . . . Really nobody cares, you know. Really nobody talks about it, you know. It’s not like you want to sit around and drink or sit around and watch T.V. or sit around and play video games and . . . talk about faith and talk about God. . . . I mean, yeah, every once in awhile me and my roommate will talk about it when we’re going to bed and stuff like that, but that’s like never.

Another student reflected on the “don’t ask/don’t tell” mentality of some students: “No one is particularly zealous and sharing their beliefs openly, anyway.” Although one staff member suggested, “Lutheran College has become somewhat more secular,” the apparent disengagement on the part of some students may
have been rooted in an individualized approach to spirituality. For instance, as one student explained, “There are really a lot of students on campus who feel more spiritual than they do religious,” while another observed,

I think pretty common with most colleges in America, that kind of trend of individual spirituality and more thinking God is a more personal thing than a community thing . . . I think college kids see a lot of corruption in the church and are distant from the kind of formality of it.

Confirming this hypothesis, a student, after expressing significant detachment from the campus’s spiritual ethos, revealed, “Anything . . . faith-based, I can do by myself, you know, like prayer . . . if I really wanted to. I mean, I don’t need to go to the chapel to do that.”

Paradoxes in Institutional Identity and Mission

The myriad forms of spiritual expression evident on the Lutheran College campus existed within an institutional context that was at once enriched and challenged by diversity. Specifically, participants noted discernable tensions surrounding the college’s juxtaposed commitments to its Lutheran denominational heritage and to the ecumenical values implicit in its concern for worldview diversity. Articulating the nuances of the college’s Lutheran identity was a challenge in and of itself, as this faculty member suggested:

I think this college in the areas of spirituality, faith, and religion has a bit of an identity crisis. . . . It may know who it is, but I’m not sure it knows about how to express that. So who are you, Lutheran College? Really, what are you? Are you a Lutheran college? Are you just a college that’s affiliated with other Lutheran colleges? And which of the Lutheran faith expressions are you?

A student expressed a similar perspective regarding the multifaceted identity of the college: “It’s called a Lutheran school. Those who aren’t from the Lutheran background think that’s what Lutheran is, but the people that are Lutheran are saying that’s not what Lutheran is, so . . . I mean, it’s that whole misconception.”
In addition to defining the nature and extent of the college’s Lutheran affiliation, the campus was also contending with how to be “a college of the church, but also one where we embrace diversity.” Lutheran College’s commitment to diversity and inclusion in light of the presence of “all kinds of different faiths here on campus” resulted in

all this friction and conflict on campus, and it’s not all-out war or battles, but . . . there’s a tension of: Who are we? And can we be all things to all people? And should we be? And that’s the dilemma that we’re facing right now.

A faculty member saw both traditional Lutheran and ecumenical elements as central to Lutheran College’s identity and acknowledged, “Once you write a mission statement like that, you know that you’re going to have that tension . . . In fact, the tension is part of the goal. The tension isn’t there when you’re doing something wrong.”

Members of the campus community assessed the college’s core values in a variety of ways, paralleling the range of beliefs and values represented on the campus. A faculty member was pleasantly surprised that Lutheran College approached diversity in such an informed, communicative, and deliberate manner:

I worried that as an institution of strong faith they wouldn’t take diversity and ideas seriously enough. . . . and that we wouldn’t discuss it as a community or that we’d bury it by ignorance and without faith. We don’t do that here I don’t think. We talk about the hard issues, we talk about homosexuality, we talk about women in . . . religious roles, we talk about these pieces that I think are . . . currently challenging religious establishments . . . We don’t shy away from those.

A Catholic student reported:

It’s not like, “I’m Lutheran, I’m better than you.” You never get that, which goes back to . . . where faith isn’t really a big deal . . . faith isn’t a problem. And the other way, if faith was a big deal, then maybe it would be a problem that I was Catholic or maybe it would be a problem that some people weren’t Lutheran.

Nonetheless, the tension was viewed negatively (or at least ambivalently) by some, particularly those who found that the
reality of life at Lutheran College fell short of their expectations, as this quote from a staff member illustrates: “It seems like Lutheran College is so afraid to offend anyone that, for the most part, Lutheran College believes in little. If we are a ‘college of the ELCA church,’ it seems logical we should stand for those beliefs.” A conservative Christian student remarked, “I perceive [the college] to be . . . a pretty confusing, gray place. I’d probably say . . . there’s not really any absolutes around here. . . . I would perceive a very nonchalant attitude.” Stark contrasts in opinions about institutional values and actions were fissures deeply rooted in fundamental worldview differences that members of the campus struggled to bridge, as we illustrate in the next section.

**Fragmentation**

The challenges associated with comprehending and communicating Lutheran College’s identity had far-reaching implications for the ways in which the college functioned. Conveying institutional purposes to external constituencies, namely prospective students and alumni, was complicated by the dual-dimensional nature of Lutheran College’s core values. Internal to the campus, fragmentation was symbolically evident in clashes over worship spaces for current students.

Lutheran College’s identity tensions were reflected in the creation of a multifaith reflection room following the demolition of the campus’s original worship space, Beacon Chapel. A new chapel was constructed for Lutheran-focused services and events, while the new reflection room, a small, interior, windowless space, was, in the words of one faculty member, “the poster of our angst.” A staff member went on to describe the controversy:

I remember there was a brouhaha about Beacon Chapel being demolished. . . . I know that the [multifaith room] was maybe kind of a compromise and, in my understanding, is supposed to be a more ecumenical space . . . in addition to the [new] chapel, which is clearly Christian. But I’ve been in the [multifaith room] a couple of times, and there’s a big cross at both ends, and so it’s not really not Christian and . . . I don’t know how it’s used.
Although some argued that placing a cross in the reflection room defeated its purpose as a multifaith space, others on the campus were dismayed by the room’s existence at all:

One of the more conservative religion majors was trying to do a grassroots “Save Beacon Chapel Movement,” and sent out an email to a bunch of his friends . . . [that said], “How can they take Beacon Chapel away? They’re desecrating Christianity and encouraging the religion of false gods on campus.”

The clashes over the college’s core identity and worship spaces were a manifestation of the wide religious worldview continuum along which members of the campus community aligned. The farther apart individuals and groups were on the continuum from one another, the more likely they were to come into conflict. Divisions in perspective served to compartmentalize the campus into factions vying for ideological space. Students readily identified the presence of religiously driven cliques:

I don’t really know if there’s anything that can be done about it specifically, but I have noticed a lot of religious cliques. Sometimes within the religion majors you have the very conservative side, and then you’ve got those that are kind in the middle, and then you’ve got the very liberal side—and they’re definitely separated. I mean, you can definitely see the separation, or at least I’ve noticed that.

The various sides of the religious divide made life difficult for students at times, either because the variety led to a struggle to find one’s place or because it fostered avoidance of potentially divisive conversations. One student affirmed, “We just avoid talking about those things, so we don’t get in arguments,” while another noted,

What I’ve seen through Bible studies or in religion discussions . . . liberal and conservative. The people way on one side versus the people way on the other side. . . . So, that occasionally makes me a little uncomfortable, partially because I don’t know exactly where I fit in yet.

Beyond student-to-student interactions, worldview fragmentation seeped into the other areas of campus life as well. One staff member, speaking of the conservative constituency, reported,
There’s a lot of rule-breaking or what they perceive they need to do in order to meet their spiritual needs, and I really struggle with that because I don’t think they get the big picture.” Religious conflicts were also apparent between the administration and the faculty:

[The president] supports the notion of a college of the church. That has, for some faculty, become . . . a lightning rod: “Well, I’m not going to chapel because [the president] thinks we should.” . . . I think that does color things around here a little bit.

Taken together, the Lutheran College spiritual climate was characterized by voluntary and diverse forms of spiritual expression, institutional values that incorporated both reverence for Lutheran traditions and ecumenicism, and fragmentation that emanated from diverse worldviews and values held by members of the campus community.

Identity-Based Experiences of the Spiritual Climate

In light of the rich contextual backdrop at Lutheran College, we turn now to consider the ways in which individual identity markers shaped experiences of the spiritual climate. Dimensions of identity that were particularly salient were those that in some regard differentiated individuals from majority characteristics and ideologies. Illuminating the experiences of those who were (or who perceived themselves to be) on the margins of the campus community introduces alternative interpretations of the spiritual climate beyond those evident in the majority narrative.

Conservative Evangelical Christians: Perceived Antagonism

According to a faculty member, “Each year, new students have brought an increasing fundamentalist influence to campus, and fundamentalism is not conducive to a sense of community.” Although many staff, faculty, and students were similarly concerned with the divisiveness they felt was engendered by the conservative Christian viewpoint, individuals who aligned themselves with this perspective were equally troubled by the reactions directed toward their constituency. A staff member lamented, “There’s an
aversion and an antipathy towards Christianity. [You’ll hear] ‘what a bunch of fundamentalists’ or something like that . . . I’m so sensitive to that. I mean, I’m more hurt than I am angry.” Moreover, a faculty member confirmed the collective stance of the college leadership:

The college has at times taken a position opposing the more evangelical fundamentalist faith expression in favor of a more liberal stance . . . and would actually stand in the way or try to be a little bit more controlling of a speaker or a program or some type of event that might appear to be a little more conservative and fundamentalist in its views versus where I think [the college] really wants to be—in the more liberal, postmodern type of faith expression.

A student stressed the disconnect she observed between Lutheran College’s message of tolerance and treatment of conservative Christians:

What’s just so frustrating is like being in a community where tolerance and diversity are preached up the wazoo, you know, and tolerance is preached by . . . the liberal Christians who are considered to be tolerant . . . and it’s so funny because they’re so intolerant of us.

In response to the antagonism they perceived, conservative Christian students devised their own ministry programming in an effort to maintain a coherent group identity and value system. A staff member explained how the new evangelical movement emerged in reaction to what conservative Christian students perceived as a dearth of spiritual opportunity for their constituency:

Depending on who you talk to, it’s different as to why it exists, but for the most part, it was because of hurt feelings or, “We don’t believe campus ministry is meeting our spiritual needs, therefore we need to fix this and do our own thing.” . . . It comes from a group of very conservative students who will not try to change what they don’t like; they simply start something new.

Religious Minorities: Limited Welcome

Several study participants noted the responsiveness on the part of the college to non-Lutheran students. A faculty member suggested that the campus pastors
worked very hard at making students aware that they are welcomed and accepted whether they come as Lutherans or some other denomination or non-Christian or no faith at all. . . . The ministry that takes place in terms of the pastoral care and concern is not at all limited to a particular denominational focus.

Another faculty member was of the opinion that “if there’s enough of a student body around that faith expression, I think the college would probably respond to that or help them find a way to express themselves.” Reiterating this sentiment, a student indicated, “I have a friend who’s an atheist and a friend who is Hindu. . . . We’re just really open, and we talk about what we believe or why we believe it all the time.”

Another segment of the campus community remained unconvinced that non-Lutheran individuals were fully welcomed into the life of the campus. A student noted, “A lot of times I think the people who are questioning their faith are kind of overlooked.” Moreover, staff members revealed their impression that Christian beliefs were deeply embedded within the institutional culture. Illustrating as much, one staff member wondered whether “people of different religious backgrounds (as opposed to Christian) feel welcomed and accepted . . . I think we often refer to faith as a set of Christian beliefs, which doesn’t leave much room for the acceptance of other religious beliefs.” Space for other faiths was also problematic, particularly given disagreements about non-Christian perspectives expressed in the chapel:

I felt really bad for our students who were either agnostic, atheist, or anything other than Christian saying, “Well, how welcoming is this environment, then, if we can’t go to chapel?” And I know some Hindu students who were like, “Well, we’d like to go in a quiet place to pray, but we feel like we can’t go there because that belongs to the Christians.”

Beyond the observations and concerns raised by members of the campus majority regarding the religious minority experience at Lutheran College, how did students, faculty, and staff who did not identify as Christians navigate the Lutheran campus? Three religious minority faculty and staff and seven students shared their experiences. Among the faculty and staff interviewees, troubling incongruities were not central to their experience. One of the non-Christian faculty members thought she “fit well” on the
campus, noting that it wasn’t the spiritual climate per se that impacted her fit, but also “the location of the school, the size, and . . . the faculty.” Another nonreligious faculty member was similarly comfortable with the campus’s values, so long as they could be disentangled from religion: “The nonreligious values, beliefs, and purposes of this campus are totally congruent with my own. The sources of those values, beliefs, and purposes are not congruent if they are traditionally religious.” A staff member saw her identity as a non-Christian as part of her contribution to the institution: “I feel like I kind of have a responsibility to be vocal on campus because part of the way faculty, staff, but especially students, come to understand their faith is by being confronted with something else.” In addition to the one-on-one interviews, informal conversations with other faculty and staff representing minority perspectives—either religious or racial/ethnic—revealed that some were of the opinion that underrepresented groups on the campus struggled to find a place within the “straight, White, Lutheran” norm. The traditional structure and temporal boundaries of campus ministry programming (particularly chapel services) presented a barrier for these groups. Moreover, some religious minority faculty and staff felt that others on the campus did not consistently treat non-Lutherans with respect and sensitivity.

Seven non-Christian students described a range of experiences with the campus’s spiritual climate. Although two participated in focus groups that were less conducive to personal reflections, five participated in either a one-on-one interview or responded to the interview via email. Two of these interviewees, both of whom identified as Caucasian, seemed relatively satisfied with the campus climate. One of the students suggested, “I think they do a pretty good job of being open to everyone,” while the other student thought she “fit, but just not with very many people.” Echoing the sentiment of the staff member who felt her presence helped others confront their own biases, the second student described a similar opportunity she had with a Christian peer who expressed surprise that a non-Christian was attending a Lutheran institution: “If I can open her eyes a little bit and . . . definitely not make her deny her faith, but just realize that not everyone’s like her . . . then maybe that’s what I can do. I want to help people not assume things.” Nonetheless, both students expressed a
similar view that campus ministry could be “more open to other religions” because “everything seems to be about Christianity.”

International Students and Racial/Ethnic Minorities: 
Identity Intersections

The remaining three religious minority students who shared their personal reflections in interviews were either international students or students of color. In fact, the race/ethnicity/nationality dimension was confounded with the religious dimension, creating yet another lens through which to interpret Lutheran College’s spiritual climate. Two of these students were fairly positive about their experience of Lutheran College life. As one of the students described:

I feel very comfortable even though I’m not a white Christian from a small town. . . . I think it helps to be really open about . . . my religion. I think that helps because a lot of people that do come from . . . a small town and they’re Christian . . . are closed-minded. . . . When they ask questions, if you answer it plainly and talk about it, then I think that definitely helps them open their minds up and makes the whole situation more comfortable, which happens a lot, so I never feel uptight about my religious background or spirituality at all.

This student supported openness on the campus to diverse religious viewpoints and the institution’s espoused diversity values. Another international student expressed that the challenges he faced upon coming to college in the United States were predicated upon cultural differences to which he was gradually becoming accustomed. Generally, he felt a good sense of fit within the campus environment because of its welcoming nature. However, he hoped to see other religions connect with the campus ministry programming and establish a forum to represent diverse faiths.

The third individual, who was both an international student and a religious minority, communicated greater struggles than the previous two individuals, primarily due to negative reactions he received from others on the campus. The student described his experience in this way:

The major struggle is certainly being agnostic in a Christian college. While I am aware Lutheran College is not a Bible college and does not
indoctrinate students, on more than a few occasions I’ve found myself involved in “prayer” situations where I felt [it] was not warranted (convocations, meetings, etc.). The only way for me to cope with these situations is staying away from them whenever possible. That probably lost me a few acquaintances and a few opportunities. On the positive side, my views have never been openly censored or discouraged in the classroom, an attitude for which I am grateful. Surely they haven’t been engaged either—as in, they’ve mostly been replied to with silence and “moving on”—but it’s still better than downright opposition.

This student found it difficult to establish social relationships with religious students and on one occasion encountered discrimination from a staff member. His feelings of alienation were driven by palpable worldview differences: “It’s hard when I’m reading The God Delusion and they wear crosses and Jesus shirts and quote verses. There is a basic incommunicability that is quite hard to overcome.”

**Sexual Minorities: Ambivalent Acceptance**

As a college of the ELCA, Lutheran College’s affiliation meant, according to a gay staff member, that they were “not by far the most liberal, but for a Christian affiliation, they’re definitely one of the more accepting.” This staff member went on to illuminate how the spiritual climate interfaced with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community on campus:

This isn’t the most accepting campus, but . . . it’s by no means terribly unaccepting . . . I think the way that this campus deals with it is by not talking about it, sort of out-of-sight/out-of-mind like, “I don’t care if you’re gay . . . that’s fine, I just don’t want to talk about it.” And in the time that I’ve been here, I’ve really been pushing the envelope . . . we have to talk about it.

A gay student reiterated the avoidance stance assumed by some people on the campus:

I think there’s been very much a division on campus. I think there’s very openly gay people on campus, and I think that they are mostly regarded well . . . but I think the people that oppose them just aren’t going to say anything.
The divided positions on homosexuality derived from individual “versions of Christianity”: some that advocated for inclusion of LGBT individuals, and others that insisted homosexuality was sinful. On the whole, the sum of these divergent positions perpetuated a climate of ambivalence for LGBT people. A faculty member described an incident in which members of the LGBT student organization developed a proposal for a campus-wide grant competition. The students were concerned about whether their proposal would be given equal consideration:

My response to him was, “Yes, you will,” but only because I knew the members of the selection committee and . . . I had faith in them that they would be open and willing to accept that. I don’t know that I would say that if it was a different group of individuals. . . . We’re not there yet . . . and just the fact that he [asked] that tells me we’re not there yet.

Moreover, though he reported feeling generally “safe” on the campus, a gay-identified student described a serious incident that suggests he may have been targeted on the basis of his sexual orientation:

I ran inside and I found my door open, just a little crack, and I walked inside, and I had been vandalized. Numerous things like detergent thrown all over the wall and carpet, poster corners clipped. I had a painting in there, one of my best paintings; they took a knife and stabbed it like maybe seven times. . . . Maybe I was targeted because, by that time, I was out.

Discussion

In sum, the spiritual climate of Lutheran College was a product of diverse and voluntary spiritual expressions, the struggle to balance the institution’s denominational heritage with its commitment to diversity, and community fragmentation brought on by conflicting worldviews. Many students, faculty, and staff expressed appreciation for an institution that purported to welcome all, but often qualified their assessments with examples that suggested the need for further efforts to foster a pluralistic environment open to the diverse constituencies that called Lutheran College home. These findings suggest several theoretical and practical implications.

First, although campus climates have been examined in the empirical research literature from multiple vantage points,
including gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and disability status (Flowers, 2004; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Mayhew, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006; Pascarella et al., 1997; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Rankin, 2005; Whitt et al., 1999), the spiritual and religious dimensions of campus climate have received less attention by comparison. This study supports the inclusion of yet another key dimension of climate—one with significant ramifications for the ways that students, faculty, and staff experience institutional environments. A person’s philosophical worldview—whether spiritual, religious, or otherwise—represents a core component of her or his identity. Much like other defining identity markers that collectively shape educational environments, the merging of diverse worldviews within a given college or university can provide a rich context for learning and development, but may also set the stage for intergroup strife and fragmentation. Constructive and intentional engagement with worldview diversity requires educators and administrators to consider the campus’s spiritual climate as one dimension among several other relevant factors.

Second, it was evident from minority narratives derived from this study that spiritual climate is not a singular, absolute reality. Though campus spiritual climates may feature general descriptors identifiable to the outside observer, the ways in which climate is perceived varies by one’s social location, that is, by one’s background, worldview, and minority/majority status. In short, climate is not a static, objective entity; rather, it is dynamically defined and uniquely constructed by the individuals who exist within it. Theoretically this suggests that spiritual climate is not merely an add-on dimension for understanding campus climate as a whole—it is in actuality a dimension that is interwoven with other dimensions. The interconnectedness of the dimensions of campus climate was exemplified in this study by the reality that the spiritual climate at Lutheran College could not be easily disentangled from the climate for people of color, international students, and LGBT students, faculty, and staff. We uncovered evidence to suggest that gender and racial/ethnic climates figured into the spiritual climate; likewise, the spiritual climate served as the basis for racial/ethnic and gender-related aspects of campus life.

Turning now to the practical implications of this study, the conflict for spiritual space and recognition on the Lutheran
campus signifies the challenge of multiplicity. Yet, many new educational directions can be derived from a campus that values pluralism and seeks to make it a purposeful component of campus life, especially given the fact that religious pluralism is an increasingly normative phenomenon even in denominationally affiliated institutions. First, religiously diverse denominational colleges would benefit from clearly and consistently communicating the meaning of the religious identity of the college. The importance of expressing what students, faculty, and staff can expect in terms of how institutional religious identity influences campus life cannot be understated. Second, it is critical for colleges and universities that value pluralism to harness the potential of the diverse, even conflicting, spiritual perspectives represented on campus. In pluralistic contexts, various groups reflecting a spectrum of views and backgrounds have a tendency to feel misunderstood and isolated. Such an environment presents an incredible opportunity for spiritual programming that provokes student development, but that also is constructed so that the discomfort accompanying development is balanced by supportive, “hearth-like” community (see Parks, 2000) where all groups have a voice and a place at the table. Finally, integration of spiritually focused programming (as opposed to creating additional programming) may be an effective practice for forging connections across multiple constituencies within pluralistic campus communities. Taken together, these new directions for practice on campus are intended to ensure that spiritual expressions can be authentically manifested in an institutional climate that challenges at the same time that it nurtures members of the community.

The limitations of this study are primarily a function of the sample. Although the student sample was generally reflective of the racial/ethnic, gender, and religious characteristics of the campus, racial/ethnic and religious minority groups were underrepresented in the faculty and staff samples. Informal conversations were conducted with nonmajority faculty and staff, but interviews would have been preferable sources of data to delve more deeply into the experiences of these individuals. Future research on collegiate spiritual climates should over-sample minority perspectives to lend further credibility to the notion that differential experiences of climate are shaped by individual identities. Additionally, the core dimensions of spiritual climate identified in conjunction
with this study were limited to the case: a small, Lutheran, liberal arts college. The nuances of spiritual climate—and ways in which spiritual climate intersects other climatic dimensions—may vary widely by institutional type, warranting further study beyond the religious college environment.

References


