Essential Responsibilities of Student Affairs Administrators: Identifying a Purpose in Life and Helping Students Do the Same

Christy M. Craft, Kansas State University
Robin Hochella, Kansas State University
Essential Responsibilities of Student Affairs Administrators: Identifying a Purpose in Life and Helping Students Do the Same

Christy Moran Craft, Kansas State University
Robin Hochella, Kansas State University

Abstract

As part of a larger investigation into the spiritual lives of student affairs administrators, the first author interviewed 24 practitioners representing four types of institutions to determine how they think about issues related to their purpose in life. The results of the study provide insight into the importance of reflecting upon such issues in order to be equipped to assist students in their own identification of a purpose in life.

In an introductory graduate-level course in student affairs, the first author, a faculty member in a graduate preparation program, asked the students in her class to read and to reflect upon Parker Palmer’s book, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (2000). As part of a reflection assignment related to the assigned reading, one student wrote:

Palmer talked about the soul. He discusses being in his early thirties and starting to form questions about his vocation. Things seemed to be all right in his life by the looks of things, but he says that the soul does not put much stock in appearances. When I read this line, I actually became teary-eyed. And, even as I write this, I feel myself beginning to choke up. I just really think that we often think that life is going all right because nothing really looks like it’s bad or out of place. But, Palmer is saying that the soul doesn’t take much stock in appearances. It made me think about the struggles that I have faced since coming here. I have not been happy and have struggled in the “soul” department. I am generally a happy person and do my daily tasks with cheerfulness and energy, but although hard to admit, I feel an empty spot somewhere inside of me. And, I can’t help but wonder if that is because my soul needs something that I’m not feeding it.

Another graduate student in the class wrote the following:

Palmer talks about vocation and how it involves a deep understanding and realization of oneself. I do not have that. Although Palmer describes some ways in which he has achieved that, whether it is through religious faith or something else, it is not something that I have been able to achieve. In all honesty, it scares me to death sometimes. Going

1 Christy Moran Craft is an associate professor of student affairs at Kansas State University. Robin Hochella is a graduate student in student affairs and works as an assistant residence life coordinator at Kansas State University.
into this profession, I believe that I need to be strong in my convictions, know what I stand for, and have a solid idea of who I am as a person and as a professional. I do not have that, as I have not taken the time to figure out where my life is leading me. This is an incredibly difficult topic for me to discuss with anyone, much less write in a paper for class.

Interestingly, many other students in that class expressed similar sentiments, though not all communicated that their struggle with the current circumstances of their lives was related to the “soul.” Others, in fact, mentioned nothing of the soul, spirituality, or religion. Regardless, a clear sense of discontentment regarding the purpose and direction of their lives was evident in the responses of many of the students.

According to research conducted by Astin, Astin, Lindholm, and Bryant (2005), approximately three-fourths of all college students reported that they are seeking meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, Parks stated, “We human beings seem unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless we can make meaning” (2000, p. 7). For these reasons among others, discussions about how to equip student affairs administrators to facilitate meaning making among students, both undergraduate and graduate, are of extreme importance for those of us in higher education.

Developing Purpose and Making Meaning in Life

In the higher education literature, the concept of purpose in life has been most frequently discussed in the context of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors of identity development, of which “developing purpose” characterizes the sixth vector. Their conceptualization of this vector involves three components: vocational goals, personal interests and activities, and interpersonal commitments. Furthermore, implicit within this vector is a sense of intentionality in determining a life direction; the authors believe that both lifestyle and family-related factors influence the process of developing a life purpose.

In addition to the vector proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993), both James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Parks (2000) discuss “faith development” as a process of making meaning in life. According to them, purpose gives significance to one’s roles and activities. The concept of faith development has also been described as “trying to make sense of the ‘big picture’” (Love, 2002, p. 358). Parks elaborated upon Fowler’s theory of faith development in an effort to capture more fully the nuances of this process in the lives of young adults. Although these theoretical models of faith development have been developed, only a few empirical studies have been published addressing the faith development process among college students (e.g., Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Radecke, 2007; Sabri et al., 2008). Most of the research that exists relates to the concept of purpose in life without being conceptualized as part of the faith development process.

For example, research suggests that having and/or developing a purpose in life is related to a number of attributes and behaviors that most people would deem positive in nature. In her review of clinical psychological research, Moran (2001) reported that students’ identification of a purpose in life affects and is affected by their desire to be actively involved in social situations and leadership roles, influences and is influenced by their physical health as well as their health-related behaviors and habits, and impacts and is impacted by their psychological well-being and overall satisfaction with life. Also, in a study involving 354 college sophomores, Molasso (2006) reported that activities that engage students with others within the campus community are positively related to their development of purpose, while more isolating activities such as watching TV and playing video games are negatively related to their search for meaning and personal
fulfillment. Molasso concluded that having a sense of purpose in life contributes to the establishment of positive characteristics, strong values, and healthy mental attitudes.

According to Johnson (2006), one of the responsibilities of professionals within higher education is to “seek new understandings of how the student searches for meaning” (p. 1). Indeed, many professionals in higher education view this as a goal in their work with students. To be sure, many desire to assist students in their holistic development. It is quite possible that practitioners in higher education need to have identified their own purpose in life in order to assist students in their search for meaning. The purpose of this study, which was part of a larger investigation into the spiritual lives of student affairs administrators, was to provide insights into how student affairs administrators representing a variety of types of higher education institutions and professional roles think about issues related to their own purpose in life.

Method

This study represents just one portion of a larger project in which 24 student affairs administrators were chosen for a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry. To compile the sample of participants, the first author obtained contact information for administrators who could potentially participate in the study by accessing institutional websites and/or divisional electronic e-mail lists. She then employed maximum-variation purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) in order to ensure the inclusion of administrators representing both sexes, diverse institutional types, and varying levels of experience. Ultimately, the sample consisted of five entry-level professionals, 13 mid-level professionals, and six senior-level professionals. As data collection took place, 15 professionals were employed at a public, four-year institution; four at a private, Baptist-affiliated college; and two at a public community college. The ratio of self-identified gender was 15 females to nine males. With each administrator, the first author conducted an open-ended, semi-structured interview. The approximate length of each interview was between 45 minutes to one hour; the location of each interview was a private, quiet location such as the administrator’s office.

The first author audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews and then, with the help of a graduate research assistant, analyzed the data using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) inductive method of qualitative data analysis. First, they coded the data by searching for an element (phrase, sentence, or paragraph) that was heuristic, or “aimed at some understanding” that was required by the researchers (p. 345). Once coded, they grouped the data together into provisional categories based on similar content. This categorization was achieved through utilization of the constant comparative method. In other words, coded units were compared to each other to establish whether they were similar and should be put in the same category or were divergent enough to be put into different categories. Common themes that intersected variations in the data emerged from the categorized and analyzed data. While many themes surfaced in the larger project, we discuss only a portion of shared themes in this smaller project.

In an effort to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research findings, the first author and her research assistant employed various strategies. For instance, they utilized member checking and peer debriefing to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Where the member checks are concerned, they conducted one with each administrator to ensure accurate representation of their thoughts and experiences (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, a different graduate student served as a peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to review the categories and collective interpretations for clarification and suggestions. Lincoln and Guba describe peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (1985, p. 308).
Certain potential limitations became evident throughout the course of the study. One such limitation is that only one region of the nation, the Midwest, was represented among the participants. There exists a possibility that regional differences are present among student affairs professionals concerning the search for a meaning in life. Another possible drawback of the interview sample is the scope of institutions at which the student affairs administrators were employed. Specifically, the Baptist affiliation of the private institution at which four of the participants worked may affect the results of the study. Including private institutions that are independent of religious affiliations as well as those that are affiliated with non-Christian religions and various Christian denominations would have likely resulted in richer data.

**Results**

**What is Your Purpose in Life?**

The student affairs professionals in this study expressed a number of insightful thoughts concerning their own purpose in life. For some, purpose in life was acquired as a result of their spiritual and/or religious beliefs. Others, however, suggested that their individual pursuits and development lay the groundwork for their sense of purpose in life. Still others communicated that their desire to help and/or to serve others forms the basis of their purpose in life. Perhaps most intriguing is the finding that many of the student affairs administrators in this study were unable to identify a purpose for their lives.

**Focus on spirituality and/or religion.** As mentioned earlier, several of the participants stated the source of their purpose as being from a higher spiritual power or from a religious text. Often, this purpose is related to obtaining spiritual and/or religious knowledge as well as living in submission and obedience to a higher power. One participant remarked that her purpose in life “comes from the Bible.” Another stated his belief that “God put me here for a purpose.” A different participant was a bit more specific in his response when he stated, “I need to love God with all of my heart, soul, and mind.” For the participants whose responses were categorized into this theme, they need not search for a life purpose but instead must simply accept and embrace their predetermined purpose.

**Focus on individual pursuits and development.** For others, their purpose in life revolves around their own individual pursuits and development. Some expressed this purpose as a desire for self-fulfillment. One participant, for instance, spoke of her hopes “to totally live life.” Others mentioned the desire to embody positive character traits (e.g., “to be a positive role model”). And, finally, another participant communicated her purpose in life by stating that it was to acquire the ability to balance successfully multiple roles and responsibilities (e.g., personal with career).

**Focus on others.** The expressed purpose in life for a number of other participants was described as a desire to help and/or to serve others in one’s immediate sphere of influence. A participant stated that her purpose was “to be a caregiver to others,” while another similarly expressed his desire “to make somebody feel good.” Still, others explicitly spoke of helping others’ dreams to be realized and of conveying wisdom and guidance to others (e.g., “to impart wisdom to students”). Ultimately, the goal of these individuals is that of offering the gifts that they have “to make the world a better place.”

**Unidentified purpose.** Interestingly, when asked about their purpose in life, many student affairs professionals in this study stated that they have not identified some “big purpose,” and, in fact, do not even think about their purpose in life very much. Others claim that they are still trying to figure it out. One individual described his ongoing search for a purpose as trying to
find shoes that fit. Another simply stated, “I’m a tree person. Others can see the forest. But, I keep bumping into the trees.”

**Are You Where You Ought to Be in Life?**

Several themes emerged when analyzing the data for the question, “Are you where you ought to be in life?” Interestingly, only one-third of the participants responded in the affirmative. Most expressed a certain degree of uncertainty. Some even believed that it is impossible to reach a place of experiencing certainty and confidence where that question is concerned. For those who did respond in the affirmative, themes that emerged focused upon how people determine whether they are where they ought to be. Some believe that feelings are the determining factor; others believe the existence of opportunities determines the answer to that question. Still, for several other participants, beliefs that their own actions dictate the degree to which they feel like they are where they ought to be were the overarching sentiment.

**Determined by feelings.** Many participants discussed the types of feelings that accompany an awareness that they are where they ought to be in life. If they feel a sense of joy, comfort, and/or confidence with themselves and/or their jobs, they are likely to believe that they are where they ought to be. One participant simply stated, “I feel comfortable where I am.” On the contrary, if they feel a sense of discontentment and/or uncertainty about themselves and/or their jobs, they may believe that they are not where they ought to be; a “vague discontentment” characterized the feelings of another participant. Additionally, several participants mentioned various possible sources of discontentment: a need for self-improvement, feeling out of control in life, lacking congruence between one’s personality and one’s job, and/or being separated from family.

**Determined by opportunities.** Others believe that if the “right doors have opened” and life’s circumstances have fallen into place to lead them to where they are, then they are where they ought to be in life. One participant summed up this thought process by stating, “Doors just open. Things just happen.” Another discussed the “circumstances” surrounding her relocation to that institution as being indicative of her need to be there. According to participants such as these two, such opportunities provide places where people can grow and can use their gifts and talents.

**Determined by one’s own actions.** For others, they must take the proper action(s) to determine where they should be in life. To this end, people often seek a higher power (e.g., “I ask God to show me”), attend counseling, and/or participate in self-reflection. One participant spoke at length about how she must “weigh the pros and cons of making a move.” Many participants expressed their belief that people often have to try new opportunities to assess whether or not they are where they ought to be.

**Discussion and Implications**

In this research, the student affairs administrators that were interviewed expressed a variety of viewpoints concerning their own purpose and place in life. When asked about their purpose in life, many were unable to articulate one clearly. Of those who did, their purpose related to their spirituality and/or religion, their focus on individual pursuits and development, or their focus upon others. When asked whether they are where they ought to be in life, many responded in the affirmative and claimed that they know this is due to their feelings, their opportunities, and/or their own actions. However, there were a few who expressed a degree of uncertainty concerning
that question. Given these findings, a number of implications emerge, the first of which concerns
the need for student affairs administrators to explore their own purpose in life.

**Purpose in Life Among Student Affairs Administrators**

Love (2001) stated that we must all consider how we create meaning, purpose, and direction in
our lives. To be sure, we should provide opportunities for student affairs professionals to
reflect upon existential issues such as those that formed the focus of this study. Perhaps the find-
ings from this study could be used to spark discussion about possible ways in which others iden-
ify meaning. Those who cannot identify a purpose in life could be encouraged to spend some
time reflecting and investigating what they value and/or which events in their lives have been
most fulfilling. Because practitioners’ purpose in life may become salient in conversations with
students, at the very least it is important that they have reflected upon it. The results of this study
indicate that many student affairs professionals have not given serious consideration to the topic.
Unfortunately, the pace of student affairs work is not conducive to much reflection. Perhaps such
times of reflection could be incorporated into ongoing training and development seminars or
even into one-on-one supervisory meetings.

Sharon Parks (2000) stated, “When we feel that we are not yet what we ought to be, we
are prone to feeling we are not where we ought to be” (p. 48). Given the findings of this study,
practitioners should also be encouraged to consider how they decide whether they are where they
ought to be in life, as well as what some other ways to determine that might be. Again, some of
the sources that participants in this study used to determine the answer to that question could be
presented to student affairs practitioners who are uncertain about whether they are where they
ought to be. Hearing others’ means of determining whether they are where they ought to be in
life would likely prompt those who are uncertain to generate their own responses.

Others have also encouraged the same type of reflection. For instance, Allen and Kellom
(2001) encouraged student affairs administrators to do their own deep soul work such as reflect-
ing on their own lives and what gives them meaning. Furthermore, Rogers and Love (2006)
suggested that we must focus upon the search for meaning in life by graduate students in student
affairs graduate preparation programs. Clearly, the graduate students’ reflections presented earlier
demonstrate this need.

**Guiding Students in Their Identification of a Purpose in Life**

Other implications of the study relate to the ability of practitioners to assist students in
their identification of a purpose in life. Moran (2001) suggested methods by which student
affairs practitioners could work with students in this regard. First, she highlighted the importance
of investing “quality time” (p. 274) with students in order to afford more opportunities for mean-
ingful conversations. Time traditionally spent in other work-related activities might need to be
sacrificed to achieve this goal. Second, she suggested the importance of “practicing the art of
asking questions, listening, and reflecting in order to engage in meaningful, intentional conversa-
tions with students about existential issues” (p. 275). Her final recommendation was that of
incorporating issues related to purpose in life into every aspect of our work with students, predo-
minantly through various types of creative programming (e.g., “philosophers in residence” in the
residence halls).

The results of this study specifically point to the second recommendation proposed by
Moran (2001). Practitioners should have an understanding of how to have conversations about
purpose in life with students. These conversations may or may not involve discussions about
spirituality and/or religion. Either way, student affairs administrators must be able to help students see their life opportunities as well as weigh the pros and cons associated with them. Furthermore, an important role of practitioners could be that of helping students understand how they feel about their current circumstances in life.

**Conclusion**

Why should we get out of bed in the morning? What is the purpose of my existence and the existence of others? Does anything really matter? What can I depend upon? Are we ultimately alone? What and who can be trusted as real? What is the ultimate character of the cosmos in which I dwell? What is right and just? How, then, shall we live? Whenever we allow such questions to permeate the fiber of our lives, we discover new depths, and enlarged vistas often catch us by surprise. Our sense of the possible and the impossible is vulnerable to being reordered. (Parks, 2000, p. 25)

Clearly, the importance of college students’ identification of a purpose in life cannot be understated (e.g., Molasso, 2006; Moran, 2001). Developing purpose is believed to be a major developmental task for students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Consequently, student affairs practitioners should give serious consideration to the aforementioned questions (Parks, 2000) in the context of their own lives. In so doing, administrators should not assume that their own purpose in life, the way they come to realize it, or the way they determine whether they are where they ought to be will be the best option for every student they encounter; for truly, several ways of coming to realize one’s personal answers to these questions arose in this study. Perhaps the findings from this study will spark discussions that better equip student affairs practitioners for this very important role and responsibility.

**References**


