Searching for Meaning on College Campuses

Creating Programs to Nurture the Spirit

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Discussing spirituality on a secular college campus can be risky. Yet faculty and students have expressed a need to explore meaning in their lives and work. This chapter describes one university's year-long efforts to develop a social web of activities around spirituality and meaning in community members' lives. We describe the process of determining needs and the resulting programs. But more important, we share lessons learned, including advice on creating the climate for spiritually oriented programming to gain acceptance and be viewed as an enhancement to campus life.

The late 1990s initiated a movement to "make spirituality public" and brought to light the need for faculty and staff to find meaning in their work and a deeper connection to the campus community. During this time, faculty questioned the traditional

academic culture and felt burdened by unrealistic publication requirements and the simultaneous downgrading of the importance of teaching in the reward structure (Astin & Astin, 1999; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). In spite of Parker Palmer's (1998) groundbreaking work exploring the inner landscape of authentic teaching, Astin and Astin (1999) found that faculty described spirituality more in terms of the outer world (social activism, good works, service learning) than the inner life of the individual.

Spirituality is not an easy topic to discuss on college campuses. Mentioning it, especially on secular campuses, raises the specter of violating the separation of church and state and can appear to cross boundaries, making some educators uncomfortable. Yet over the past decade, writers in higher education have identified the inextricable link between education and spirituality (Astin et al., 2002; Brown, 1999; Chavez, 2001; Lindholm & Astin, 2006). From these authors' viewpoint, spirituality is grounded in the human experience of living, suggesting that to be truly whole, faculty must find ways to connect with other like-minded individuals and identify ways to merge their academic work with their quest for meaning. To paraphrase Socrates, members of the academy are asking whether an unexamined academic life is worth living. They are seeking answers to questions that transcend how to teach well or achieve tenure. Of course, some believe that the life of the mind is the sole area of academic concern and the only content appropriate to education (Fish, 2003). But students and many colleagues are telling a different story. Students are asking faculty to help them explore the meaning of their life and work (Kuh & Umbrach, 2004; Parks, 2000), beyond learning the discipline. Faculty are seeking ways to find balance in personal and professional life and safe venues to discuss the meaning of their work in a larger context (Astin & Astin, 1999).

A recent study by Lindholm and Astin (2006) adds to the evidence of the faculty's interest in spiritual pursuits. Their survey of close to forty thousand faculty identified this interest and its prime obstacle: the faculty's lack of opportunity for such discussions and dialogues. In addition, they found that faculty who considered themselves spiritual regarded students' personal development as important as their intellectual and career development.

Although the primary mission of teaching centers is to promote excellence in teaching, many centers define a broader role and provide a more holistic approach to development through faculty life stages. A more recent conception of teaching centers as promoting learning communities (Cox, 2001), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and teaching commons (Hutchings & Huber, 2007) has at its core the need for faculty to have gathering places to learn and grow as teachers, researchers, professionals, and human beings. As part of this movement, some teaching centers have begun to explore spirituality in communal settings. Although programs such as book groups are welcome opportunities to explore this topic, they are often isolated activities. Creating a truly transformative experience requires the efforts of more than one entity (Miller, 2001). Teaching centers need to find ways to create what Stafford (2001) calls a “web of sociality.” They have to intersect and interact with other university units to coordinate programming for multiple campus constituencies. Casting this broader net, these joint efforts can create campuswide interconnections that address the spiritual aspects of our work and lay the infrastructure to sustain the interest.

This chapter outlines Northeastern University’s attempt to create this social web through collaboration. We describe the multiple activities that we developed to nurture the spirit on the campus and the important lessons we learned.

Addressing Spiritual Needs on Campus

The idea of creating forums for discussing the role of spirituality on the campus of Northeastern University was initially raised by the Spiritual Life Office (SLO)—part of the Student Affairs Division. The SLO wanted to deepen its mission to address the spiritual needs of faculty by creating a community that welcomed discussion about the need for human interaction and balance. To begin to change faculty perception of Spiritual Life as just a student organization, the SLO approached the Center for Effective University Teaching (CEUT) to discuss collaboration, first in an effort to raise campus awareness of the need to explore the search for meaning in work and life.

Our first challenge was finding ways to introduce the topic to faculty in a culturally acceptable way. Unless carefully conceived, this topic can become a flash point for many other agendas, unrelated to the initial intention of mutual exploration of meaning (Miller, 2001). Therefore, we decided to frame the project within the inquiry research model, which was familiar to our colleagues. We applied for a highly competitive internal grant from the president's office that funded projects promising to move the institution toward excellence. We argued that one way to achieve excellence was to help the community examine the meaning in their work and the connections between units and individuals. We proposed specific goals: 1) to gather baseline data on thoughts and feelings about the role of spirituality on the campus, 2) to begin to define spirituality in a welcoming and inviting environment on a nonsectarian campus, and 3) to initiate programming to promote community and connections among faculty, staff, and students. We also listed outcomes important to the mission of the institution: to develop a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal to disseminate the work, to develop a model to inform and guide other campuses interested in developing spirituality on campus, and to provide venues to enhance the interaction between various community sectors, including staff, administrators, students, and faculty. To our delight, we received one of only five grants awarded that year. But even more important to our mission was the administration's recognition that the topic was important to the campus and could belong in a research institution.

Taking Steps to Make the Vision Real

To stay within the institution's research culture and the parameters of the grant, we first created a simple mail survey that asked participants (faculty, administrators, and staff) to reflect on the role of spirituality in their lives and areas on the campus where they felt it could be nurtured. We used the survey data to shape the programming for nurturing the spirit. At about the same time, Lindholm and Astin (2006) were asking similar questions in their 2004–2005 Triennial National Faculty Survey, conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. The results of our single-institution study ($n = 285$, 19 percent return

rate) were consistent with this larger survey of 37,827 full-time undergraduate faculty from 373 four-year colleges and universities. Participants strongly agreed that spirituality was synonymous with developing a meaningful philosophy of life and finding meaning. When asked if the university was a setting where spirituality should be nurtured, respondents split in their opinions. At our institution, community members tended to disagree with the proposition that administrative departments, research labs, research activities, academic departments, classrooms, and the health center were places where spirituality should be nurtured. Further analyses indicated that faculty disagreed significantly more than administrators or staff regarding the appropriate campus places for nurturing the spirit. Female community members were more receptive to different venues.

The survey data were eye opening for us. We realized that there were some very strong feelings about promoting a culture of spirituality. The process of surveying participants helped us understand some of these feelings, decide what to include in our programs, and understand our challenges. Clearly, the greatest challenge would be introducing the ideas in a context of teaching and academic departments. The mixed opinion led us to two operating principles. First, we needed to start slowly by introducing the idea into smaller venues and with self-selected individuals, and second, we had to conceptualize a variety of programming to appeal to the different needs. We began with a web matrix of interrelated activities to address the varied needs expressed in the survey (Figure 9.1). We wanted to design campuswide programming to build a social, interconnected web to help support and sustain the initiative (Stafford, 2001).

Our next challenge was naming the initiative. We wanted a title that would capture the need to come together in a community setting and at the same time convey that this was something beyond the “usual” community activities. We also knew from the survey that it was risky to use “spirit” in the title, but we took that risk. We finally settled on *Nurturing the Spirit: Building Campus Community*.

We then began to conceptualize a series of programs to provide different activities for the many constituents. Our goal was to break the isolation of our work and to bring people together to talk about

Figure 9.1. University Web of Sociality Spirituality Web

life choices, community values, our students, and our own development and growth as a member of this campus community. Even though both individual and institutional change is hard, change theory provided some guidelines. If we were going to change the culture, we knew we had to create a variety of programming venues to engage individuals who were in different stages of wanting to explore spirituality (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992), including programming that allowed individuals to reflect on their assumptions and beliefs about the role of spirituality on a campus in a communal setting (Schein, 1995). Our slate of potential programming for the grant varied from small, intimate settings to a large campuswide conference. We planned short-term and long-term initiatives and one activity that

brought faculty, staff, and students together. Our initial combination of activities encompassed different degrees of overt spiritualism in the hope that we would find a successful mix. What follows is a brief description of the year-long programming.

Nurturing the Spirit Programming

We began slowly by bringing together those who were action-oriented or, in the words of Rogers (1995), early adopters of the idea that spirit can play a vital part in who we are and what we do in our academic life and work. Our first initiative was designed to test the results of the survey that the classroom was not an appropriate venue to explore spirituality. We solicited participants for a discussion group titled *Nurturing the Mind and Spirit in the Classroom*, to give us ideas to build on. To our amazement, forty classroom instructors and ten staff members attended. The lively exchange of ideas progressed to deeper levels, as participants shared their feelings of isolation and the need to connect with colleagues and students in more meaningful ways. With this event, we had our first group of supporters.

This initial success gave us the credibility and the support to move forward to another relatively low-cost program—the Spirituality Book Group—starting with the most famous book on authenticity and meaning, *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer, 1998). We sent out invitations to the community requesting those interested to commit to one semester, attend biweekly meetings, agree to be active participants, and share facilitation. Beginning with ten individuals, the Spirituality Book Group became one of the most enduring activities. It continued each semester for two years, with a core group of four or five returning participants, joined by two to three new members. Ranging across faculty rank and colleges, attendees included a number of respected senior professors and a former provost.

Concurrently, we developed a series of loosely structured, monthly gatherings for faculty and staff called *Breakfast for the Soul*. Participants came to explore, over a full breakfast, how to create deeper meaning in campus work and how to increase connections on the campus. The meeting was scheduled early so that staff members could participate. Because of the participants' varied

needs to balance their work and life commitments, we structured the breakfast so that those who arrived late or left early would still feel that they had experienced community. Specifically, the beginning of each session was socializing and checking in, the middle portion was a focused activity (see Table 9.1) and group discussion, and the latter part was a summary of our ideas. We limited participation to twenty-five to allow everyone the opportunity to get to know each other. Our hope was to have at least enough people to begin a real dialogue, and the result was our most popular programs that year. Within twenty-four hours of e-mail notification of each breakfast, it had completely filled up. Again, a core group attended monthly, with others coming occasionally, as their schedules and hectic lives permitted.

When asked to evaluate this program, participants said it allowed them to pause during a very busy semester to reflect and to reach out to others around issues of meaning in our work. Staff particularly liked the idea of interacting with the faculty to talk about students and their common educational mission. Breakfast for the Soul was also identified as one of the few venues where faculty and staff could gather together on the campus as respected equals to discuss a shared agenda. Both faculty and staff felt that the breakfast provided them with balance, support, and professional nurturing.

Our third program—What Matters Most—brought students into the conversation. This initiative grew out of our concern that our students framed success in life as getting a good job and making money, and we wanted to offer an alternative perspective. Over pizza and soda, students heard invited faculty and staff explain what gave meaning to their lives and how they defined success. Our presenters included an academic dean, an athletic department member, and faculty members. Their stories were powerful and moving. One presenter was a senior staff member who had been a professional athlete and senior vice president in a large corporation before coming to the university. He opened his presentation by apologizing for having his cell phone on. He explained that, with his wife out of the country, he had to be available to his two young daughters in case of emergency. This personal sharing modeled the importance he placed on family and balance over prestige and salary.

Table 9.1. Breakfast for the Soul Activities

1. Focus Opening Activity

List the names of five people, living or dead, who have or had qualities/abilities that you admire and who are leading or led lives of meaning.

From the list, narrow to three.

For these people list the qualities/attributes/characteristics that made you identify them as special.

Elaborate on these qualities (e.g., if they are caring): how is this person caring in a way that another would not have been; what's special about this caring.

Look over what you've written in #4—are there similarities, common words, common themes?—list and then share together.

2. Token Sharing

Bring an item that has special meaning in your life; something that helps you connect to a deeper part of yourself—share with your group why the object is symbolic and why you brought it to share.

*3. Heart Stones**

Take a heart stone from the pile—read the description in the book; share with a partner why you think you received this heart stone and how you can apply its message today in your work.

4. Parker Palmer views “education as spiritual formation—that the teacher is the living link between the knower and the known, the learner and the subject to be learned . . .”

Take a second to think about this statement; write your initial response(s), both positive and negative.

Now, write down ways you currently act as that link that allows students freedom to explore who they are.

Share in the group your ideas and actions as a teacher/mentor/guide that make education spiritual formation.

** Heart Stones – Sophia's Gift of the Spirit 1-877-440-990*

The year-long series of activities culminated with our mini-conference (see the agenda in Table 9.2)—a day-long series of talks, interactive workshops, social events, and community-building activities to celebrate a year of exploring our communal quest for meaning. The call for proposals elicited a surprisingly wide variety of proposals from various constituents and departments, allowing us to choose presenters from each of the university colleges. With the strong support of both the president and provost, who welcomed and keynoted the conference, over one hundred faculty and staff attended during the final week of the semester. Our luncheon speaker had published a book on being passionate about teaching, and this topic attracted a large number of instructors to the luncheon. The final social event in the afternoon was a time to feed the body and to express the feelings of the soul. We posted a large piece of felt cloth with small, cut-out, felt gingerbread figures and asked people to write messages on the figures about meaning and spirit. This activity left us a beautiful visual reminder of the day that we could hang in various locations on campus.

On a 5-point scale, with 5 being “excellent,” participants judged the value of the mini-conference sessions within the range of 2.8–5.0 and effectiveness of learning within the range of 3.0–5.0. As some of them wrote, “I was heartened to see that so many people are yearning for community and meaning in their lives” and “I think today has been a wonderful opportunity to come together and learn about community, I think all of us find it difficult to see, be part of, and establish community here.” Another mentioned that “building community can happen in surprising and subtle ways.”

Of course, these participant evaluations are strictly perceptual, and our lack of hard quantitative, longitudinal data is a limitation of this work. But we can say that the individuals who participated came from a wide variety of administrative offices, all six colleges in the university, and many individual disciplines. Our final numbers of attendees were the largest for any voluntary program that either the CEUT or the SLO had offered in recent memory. This added credence to our initial hypothesis that this kind of programming was needed and that combining our resources made sense. Based on the overwhelmingly positive

**Table 9.2. Nurturing the Spirit: Building Campus Community
Mini-Conference (President's Excellence Grant)**

8:00 A.M.–8:30 A.M.	Registration
8:30 A.M.–9:00 A.M.	Welcome–President
9:00 A.M.–10:00 A.M.	Opening Plenary–Provost
10:00 A.M.–12:00 P.M.	Morning Breakout Sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building People: Faculty and Students Engaging outside of the Classroom–College of Engineering • Listening and Telling Our Stories: Cultivating Community–College of Business Administration • The Role of the University in Creating Authentic Community–Spiritual Life Office and the Center for Effective University Teaching
12:00 P.M.–1:30 P.M.	Luncheon–Passionate Teaching
1:30 P.M.–3:30 P.M.	Afternoon Breakout Sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spirituality and Community: Sources of Strength in Uncertain Times–College of Health Sciences • Cultivating Community Through Ethical Reflection–College of Arts and Science and Center for Experiential Education • Fostering Caring Connections on Campus– Center for Counseling and Student Development
3:30 P.M.–4:30 P.M.	Final Thoughts and Social Hour

feedback from participants, we believe that they felt the conference met a need to establish a sense of belonging and meaning on campus.

Learning from Mistakes

Through this initial programming, we learned a number of important lessons about bringing this vital topic of spirituality to a wide variety of constituents on a nonsectarian campus. As in most of life's lessons, there is much to be gained from our experiences, and we hope that by sharing we will help others who are contemplating advancing the concept of spirituality on their campus.

Early on, it became clear that gaining administrative support was of prime importance. Soliciting the support of the president and provost allowed us to get publicity that we might not have received. For example, both the university newspaper and the student newspaper wrote high-profile articles on the programs sharing the goals and reasoning behind this type of new programming on campus.

Although a campuswide survey was time-intensive, it was extremely valuable. The results gave us insight into the interested campus parties, the types of programming, and an idea of what would be accepted and what would be challenging. The survey also gave some academic legitimacy to the endeavor, because faculty saw our approach as rigorous, and the programming and the results were later accepted as a part of the university-wide research exposition. Though it was an unintended result, we received a number of comments attached to the survey, both positive and negative, that gave us additional insight into the process.

We discovered the importance of personally reaching out. We found that because of the potential misunderstanding of the topic, we needed to talk about it directly with people and explain our intentions so that it was not seen as a religious event. Every faculty or staff member whom we approached to offer a program, run a session, or facilitate a book group, accepted.

The need to spend more time on building an infrastructure became important. Keeping administrative support became all the more obvious when, during the next year, the provost stepped down, the director of the SLO returned to faculty, and the CEUT

staff was diminished. As a result, and without longitudinal support, programming did not sustain itself outside the Spirituality Book Group, which continued mostly because of two instructors who were passionate about continuing.

In hindsight, we would have involved the advisory boards of both the CEUT and SLO more closely in the endeavor to create faculty champions to continue the work, regardless of administrative changes. We also would have requested more initial funding to institute more rigorous outcome assessment, even in the pilot stages, to give champions data to demonstrate the impact of this project.

Last, cost was not a significant factor in designing programs. Our most expensive projects were the survey construction and the mini-conference. The costs of running the Spirituality Book Group, the Teaching and Spirituality Workshop, Breakfast for the Soul, and What Matters Most were easily absorbed by our department budgets.

Conclusion

Engaging a campus in the quest for meaning and spirituality is not a project that lends itself to conclusions. Finding value and meaning in work is an ongoing human quest. The success of our year-long efforts highlighted the need of some faculty, staff, and students to explore the spiritual dimension. Despite sustainability issues, we were encouraged by the fact that about 150 individual faculty (20 percent) and 40 professional staff attended at least one event that grappled with the concept of meaning making. Adding student activities into the program provided venues for the entire campus community to come together around the common educational mission and to share their work struggles and quest for meaning.

Commitment and infrastructure were more important than money. No one requested course release or funding to participate or asked what they would gain from participation. The growth of the program rested on a few champions, a collaborative spirit in the programs, and a willingness to take risks. In other institutions, the viability of these programs will depend on the institution's commitment and its ability to overcome the usual inertia and unwillingness to change.

Could we have sustained Nurturing the Spirit? We continually ask ourselves that question. Multiple time demands, changing personnel, and uncertain life circumstances have made it difficult. But to relegate spirituality to the Student Affairs office or the Chaplaincy Office or a wellness committee is clearly *not* the way to meet an ever-growing need in an ever more hectic world. The literature suggests the need for this type of programming on the twenty-first-century campus, and we hope our project will smooth the way for others to create venues for spiritual dialogue and discussion.

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