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Incorporating Religiosity, Spirituality, and Mindfulness into the Professional Development of Residence Life Staff

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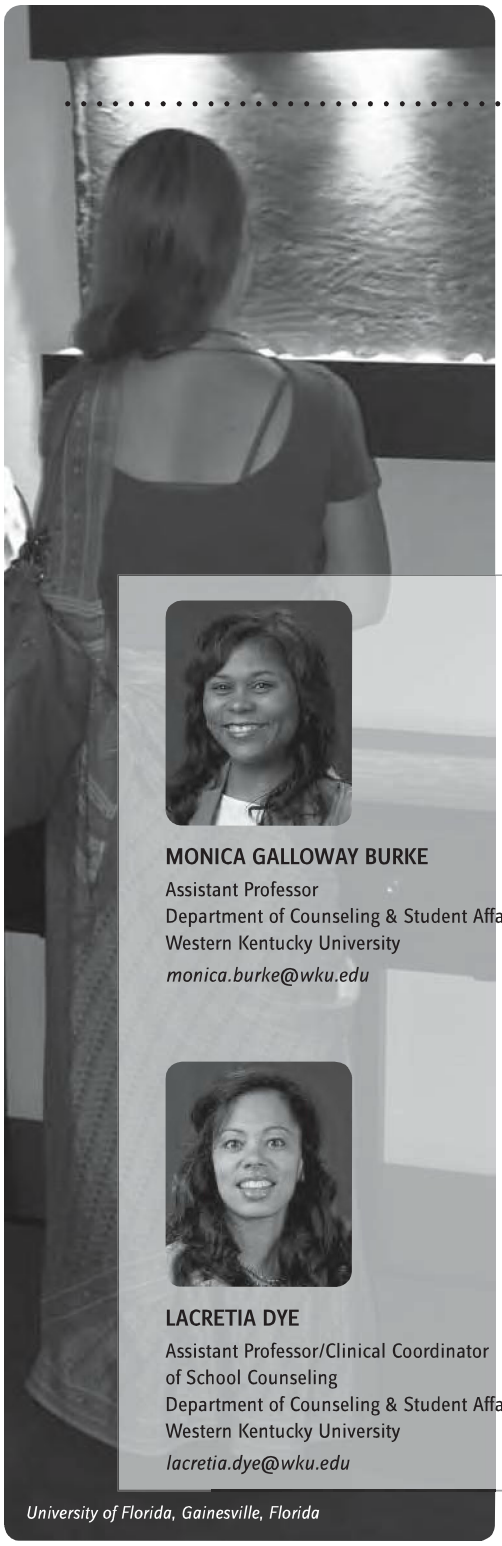

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INCORPORATING AN UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY into the professional development of residence life staff can give them the knowledge and insights needed to successfully utilize students' already heightened awareness of their own religiosity, spirituality, and mindfulness, creating an environment that meets their emotional and psychological needs in a more comprehensive and fulfilling manner. Specifically, the competencies developed by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling are discussed in terms of their utility in working with college and university students, many of whom are struggling with this critical dimension of their lives as they progress through the higher education experience. Recommendations for incorporating these competencies into the professional development activities of residence life staff are integrated throughout the narrative in order to foster greater efficacy in responding to students' religious and spiritual needs.

College can be a stressful time in a student's life. In fact, nearly 30% of students report feeling overwhelmed a great deal of the time, while self-rated emotional health for incoming first-year students is at an all-time low (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2011). The reality is that the modern campus is a constant source of tension, anxiety, and frustration for most students. Since many students spend a significant amount of out-of-class time in residence halls, this uniquely positions residence life, as Blimling (1993) posited, to provide more opportunities to influence the development and growth of students than can other functional areas in student affairs. During a college student's matriculation, residence life staff often serve as the first and consistent point of contact for residents who need support when experiencing problems, and providing them with training enables them to respond effectively and to assist other students in moments of distress.

"An attitude of faith has an important influence on student welfare and success in college because it provides critical psychological and spiritual ballast that is needed to respond to the intellectual and emotional upheavals that college life usually brings."

According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2012), residence life staff have a responsibility to provide appropriate counseling support within the scope of their training and expertise and to develop relationships with students that demonstrate a genuine interest in their academic and personal pursuits. To accomplish this, it is imperative that residence life staff be cognizant of relevant theoretical concepts related to the enhancement of coping skills as well as how to apply those concepts in an effective manner. Through various professional development avenues, residence life staff must be provided with opportunities to learn how to assist students in mitigating the counterproductive influences of psychological distress and anxiety.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY AMONG COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

As Johnson (2006) noted, 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 student affairs educators already view this as a major goal in their work with students. In light of this, residence life staff should be provided with opportunities to gain the awareness, knowledge, and skills to effectively and comfortably incorporate concepts like religion, spirituality, and mindfulness into their interpersonal interactions with students if the need arises. As concluded in the research by Lovell and Kosten (2000), well-developed human facilitation skills (e.g., counseling skills) are recognized as important for successful student affairs practice.

During college, students develop as unique individuals and seek autonomy as they interact with their surrounding environment (Blimling, 2010). Experiencing anxiety and depression as a part of this individuation process is not uncommon for college students, and religion and spirituality can help to counter these stressors: "An attitude of faith has an important influence on student welfare and success in college because it provides critical psychological and spiritual ballast that is needed to respond to the intellectual and emotional upheavals that college life usually brings" (Dalton & Crosby, 2010, p. 1). Student development theory posits that concepts such as faith, spirituality, religion, and meaning of life are important issues for college students, especially as they go through individuation (Fowler, 1981; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999).

Spirituality can moderate the relationship between negative life experiences and levels of depression and anxiety, can serve as a buffer against the undesirable effects of stressful life events, and has an important relationship to psychological adjustment (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). College students have reported experiencing more life satisfaction with regard to a self-reported level of spirituality, indicating that they are integrating a spiritual component into the emotional dimension of health (Nelms, Hutchins, Hutchins, & Pursley, 2007). A study of the impact of religious coping associated with stress among college students revealed that, among the positive outcomes associated with stress, religiosity had the greatest effect on promoting feelings of confidence in one's ability to handle personal problems (Merrill, Read, & LeCheminant, 2009). For these reasons, understanding

spirituality, religiosity, and mindfulness and the roles these concepts play in coping during stressful or uncertain times is integral for student affairs professionals as they interact with students.

CHANGING REALITIES/ CHANGING RESPONSIBILITIES

As indicated in Moran's (2003) study, many student affairs professionals believed that a "hands-off approach was best when dealing with delicate concerns of a spiritual or religious nature" (p. 53), but this approach is no longer acceptable since, when faced with stressful life events, most Americans turn to religion for comfort and support (Schottenbauer et al., 2006). Data from a 2004 survey of first-year students revealed that 69% of the respondents indicated that their religious/spiritual beliefs provided them "with strength, support, and guidance," while 58% of them noted that prayer was helpful "in solving problems" (Astin et al., 2005). In light of this, using professional staff development to instruct and coach residence life staff about techniques to competently and comfortably discuss religion and spirituality and finding meaning and purpose in life with students is timely.

While many residence life staff may agree that it is important to be open and receptive to the spiritual and religious process of the students with whom they have contact, the pertinent question is actually how to be sensitive to each student's religious or spiritual process as it relates to any given presenting dilemma or problem. In other words, what does being open and receptive look like, behaviorally speaking? What does the spiritual and religious process look like in the communication between a staff member and a student? What should staff be considering when they work with religious and spiritual students? Given that this topic is a relatively new one in the literature, it might be helpful to consider what the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of the American Counseling Association, has endorsed as competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling (2009). While the competencies are written as a guide for licensed professional counselors, several of them are appropriate learning objectives in the training of residence life staff. Relevant competencies are discussed below, with ideas offered about how to incorporate these into staff development. For the purpose of focus, the terms *professional counselor* and *client* have been replaced with *helper* and *student* respectively.

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Time taken in the present has the potential to enhance students' attention and focus, as well as to improve memory, self-understanding, and self-management skills.

COMPETENCIES FOR AN AWARENESS OF RELIGIOSITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND MINDFULNESS

Religious and Spiritual Development

ASERVIC (2009) underscores two competencies related to religion and spirituality: the ability to describe the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion, including the basic beliefs of various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism; and the recognition that students' beliefs (or absence of beliefs) about spirituality and/or religion are central to their worldview and can influence psychosocial functioning. Based upon these competencies, the following may be incorporated into professional staff development training:

- A review of the definitions for religion, spirituality, and mindfulness, including the difference between religion and faith (Cashwell, 2011; Duba Onedera, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2012);
- Examples of practice, including rituals and traditions of various religions and/or what it may look like, for example, to be a practicing Orthodox Jew (Duba Onedera, Minatrea, & Kindsvatter, 2008; Marks, 2004);
- Examples of how religiosity, spiritual practice, and/or mindfulness can impact psychosocial functioning in both positive and negative ways (Cashwell, 2011; Kahle & Robbins, 2004; Wiggins Frame, 2003); and
- Opportunities for residence life staff to share their own definitions of religion, faith, spirituality, and mindfulness, including sharing about their own religious or spiritual identity and how they practice it (which serves the purpose of illustrating diversity and uniqueness even among persons who identify with similar perspectives).

These activities are abbreviated here, but they can provide a springboard from which to develop a hands-on training experience. Given the great variety of religious and spiritual practices, attention may be paid to those that are most known and encountered in the community.

The ASERVIC competencies suggest that professional counselors should be able to describe and apply various models of spiritual and/or religious development and to understand their relationship to human development. While residence life staff have been trained in student development theory, a brief overview about faith, religious development, and spiritual development could be useful in obtaining greater insight into how a student's religiosity and/or spirituality is impacting a presenting concern or helping them cope with the concern. For example, Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development could be introduced, with various case studies presented to apply the theory in a student services context (see Parker, 2011; Swezey, 1990). For additional relevant developmental theories, see Allport (1978), Genia (1995), and Washburn (1995).

Self-Awareness

Competencies related to self-awareness focus on the intrapersonal process of the helper. For example, helpers are encouraged to explore their own attitudes and beliefs, as well as their values about spirituality and/or religion in addition to how these personal beliefs and attitudes might impact how they interact with others, such as students. In order to begin to address the importance of these competencies, residence life staff development programs might include the following activities and/or objectives:

- Continuing the group discussion of personal attitudes, beliefs, and values about each participant's spirituality and/or religious practice;
- Distributing and having participants take personal assessments in order to encourage a more in-depth exploration of their religiosity and/or spirituality (e.g., Hall & Edwards, 1996, Spiritual Assessment Inventory; Kass, Friedman, Lesserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991, Index of Core Spiritual Experiences; Piedmont, 1999, Spiritual Transcendence Scale; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997, Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire; Veach & Chappel, 1992, Spiritual Health Inventory); and
- Presenting an opportunity for participants to consider how their own religious and spiritual experiences, as well as personal beliefs and attitudes, could help them understand any given student's experience, as well as get in the way of empathizing with and understanding another person's experience. Role play activities, for example, might be used.

Residence life staff development training should stress the notion that everyone, including residence life staff, has inherent limitations in understanding another's spiritual and/or religious perspective. As such, part of the training should underscore the importance of being acquainted with religious and spiritual resources, as well as individuals who can be avenues for consultation or referral. Ways to meet this objective might include but are not limited to the following:

- Hosting a panel of religious and spiritual leaders in the community for questions and answers, and
- Hosting a panel of licensed mental health professionals who specialize in religious and spiritual counseling, can speak about how religiosity and/or spirituality can influence psychosocial functioning, and can discuss when referrals should be made to a licensed mental health professional. These professionals, who specialize in religious and/or spiritual practice, could also serve as consultants for the development of the residence life staff development curriculum.

Mindfulness

Often, college and university students begin to live their lives in auto-pilot mode; they go through the motion of class, study, and social activities while not really paying attention to what they are doing (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). They tend to spend a lot of time thinking about their instructors' feedback and grades they received in the past and the assignments, tasks, and activities to be completed in the future (Pryor et al., 2011). Unfortunately, because of the demands of college life, many students miss the opportunity of being fully in the present. Time taken in the present has the potential to enhance students' attention and focus, as well as to improve memory, self-understanding, and self-management skills

(Baer, 2003). Residence life staff can teach students to give attention to things in the present moment through the process of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through purposefully paying attention in the present moment while non-judgmental observation is increased and automatic responding is reduced (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness interventions are associated with a range of psychological and physical health benefits (Mehranfar, Younesi, & Banihashem, 2012). Specifically, mindfulness-based activities have been beneficial for individuals who suffer from depression, impulsive/binge eating, stress, pain, and illness (Baer, 2003; Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). All these conditions have a high prevalence in college students, and mindfulness practice can be adapted to fit the unique experiences of college life. Although there are a multitude of techniques that may be implemented when learning to experience mindfulness, residence life staff might include the following principles to explore when working with students (adapted from Gillen & Gillen, 2008):

- Stillness–the ability to quiet the mind and body; to be self-aware; maintain sensitivity, self-control, and self-regulation.
- Listening–the ability to tune in to what the heart, mind, and body have to say. This skill is important for maintaining self-understanding and discrimination. Appropriate listening decreases the chances of self-destructive behavior.
- Grounding–the ability to connect to the earth, to be physically present in the body, and to maintain a sense of competence, physical safety, and security.
- Strength–the ability to employ mental strength and positive self-talk, as well as to respect boundaries. This also includes emotional strength, which is the ability to feel, identify, and express feelings without harming oneself or others.
- Community–the nurturing structure that cultivates the ability to give and receive support, as well as maintain compassion, healthy communication skills, and other abilities necessary to live cooperatively in a college setting.

Communication

The final category of the ASERVIC competencies that is particularly relevant to residence life staff is related to communication. Residence life staff should be able to recognize spiritual and/or religious themes present in the student's communication, and the response should be one of curiosity and sensitivity. The response should recognize three dimensions of an individual: the cultural particulars (e.g., religion); the individual's situation, history, personality, and temperament; and the universal emotions and dilemmas of living (McAuliffe, 2013). Furthermore, responding with curiosity and sensitivity should also involve "leaning in" (McGoldrick, 1998)—a proactive form of empathy which consists of actively recognizing and hearing details about the legitimacy of customs and ideas that are foreign, morally questionable, or even distasteful. Leaning in allows one to pause for reflection and acknowledgement in order to consider alternative responses. Entering another's framework requires hard work (McAuliffe, 2013) and a willingness to want to connect with someone different from one's self. This can be especially important for a residence life staff member

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who is agnostic working with a student who is an evangelical Christian or vice versa. In this case, the response should be consistent with the student's spiritual and/or religious perspective. Discussion related to these objectives can certainly be part of the panel of expert discussions. They also can be addressed by using case examples and discussing them in groups or acting them out in role plays (case examples can be developed in consultation with licensed mental health professionals). The following is a sample case:

> Sarah, a first-year student, comes to you to talk about a dating concern. She tells you that she just needs to talk to someone about her boyfriend, Dan. She remarks that she "really, really likes him" and sometimes wonders if she is in love with him. She also believes that God blessed her with him and that Dan would not be in her life "if it wasn't for God." She tells you that although he is not Catholic, he started going with her to the student center on Tuesdays for movie night. Dan has been talking to her about having sex. She tells you she is confused. On the one hand, she does not want to disappoint him, and on the other hand, she wants to do the "right thing." Consider the following questions. As you read the case example, what personal reactions did you experience related to dating, sex, and God? What religious themes did you notice, and how do you believe Sarah identifies herself? What about her religiosity is unfamiliar to you, and how will you gain additional information in order to respond to her effectively if she were to talk with you again? What about her religiosity is familiar to you, and how will what you know help or hinder you in effectively listening and helping her? What personal religious or spiritual reactions did you have as you read this case?

CONCLUSION

In a national study, the Higher Education Research Institute found that, compared to their predecessors, today's college and university students tend to be more interested in spirituality and religion, are more likely to be actively engaged in a spiritual quest, and are more interested in exploring the meaning and purpose of life (Astin et al., 2005). Today's students see higher education institutions as playing a significant role in their spiritual development and in their effort to make sense of their existence in a more meaningful context. As such, it is important to recognize that these dimensions of their lives (religiosity, spirituality, and mindfulness) can be instrumental in promoting emotional well-being during stressful situations (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Students increasingly look within themselves to find solutions to their complex and troublesome life situations. Given this reality, it is essential that residence life staff be skillful in employing religiosity, spirituality, and

mindfulness as strategies to assist students in coping with the stressors associated with the college experience. Part of this process entails staff engaging in systematic self-reflection about their own feelings related to religiosity, spirituality, and purpose in life. As Love (2001) noted, "Student affairs professionals need to reflect on their own spiritual development. If spirituality and spiritual development are inherent in all people (and not just 'religious' people), then we need to consider this developmental process in our own lives" (p. 14).

The incorporation of the ASERVIC competencies is one model or framework from which to consider possible areas of residence life staff training related to student religious and/or spiritual issues. Given the dearth of literature on what areas of competencies should be considered in training, the hope is that this model provides some ideas for training objectives. At the very least, residence life staff should learn basic microcounseling skills to practice "the art of asking questions, listening, and reflecting in order to engage in meaningful, intentional conversations with students about existential issues" (Moran, 2001, p. 275). If campuses are to foster the religious and spiritual development of students, open discussions should occur about how students learn and grow, and those who work with students must develop some language that will help guide the conversations (Braskamp, 2007). Given their professional roles and responsibilities, as well as their inherent roles as helpers, advisors, and role models, residence life staff should participate in professional development activities that will allow them to create and maintain an environment that fosters students' religious, spiritual, and emotional needs.

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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the primary premise in this study that a hands-off approach by student affairs professionals when dealing with delicate concerns of a spiritual or religious nature is no longer acceptable and that staff should be provided with training so as to be able to discuss religion and spirituality with some degree of ease and competence.

2. The authors note that CAS standards for residence life require staff to assume responsibility for providing "appropriate counseling support" within the scope of their duties. How would you define appropriate counseling support in the context of the issue outlined in this study? How might this kind of support differ according to staffing roles in housing (e.g., an RA versus a full-time master's-level RD)?

3. The authors use the ASERVIC competencies to guide residence life professionals responsible for designing staff development in the area of spiritual and religious development/exploration for students. What does the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (2010) recommend?

4. Do you believe there are any risks associated with providing professional development sessions based on the ASERVIC competencies (including the ones suggested by the authors), and how would you mitigate those risks?

5. Given that resident advisors–typically undergraduate students–are very likely to engage in conversations like those in the case featuring Sarah, to what extent should this staff group receive training as suggested in the study? Do you think the same competencies apply to this level of staff?

6. The study notes that students have lost their ability to live in the moment and to be mindful. What impact might the consumption of technology have on living in the moment and being mindful?