

Measuring Faculty Spirituality and its Relationship to Teaching Style

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Spirituality has been associated with a host of positive mental health outcomes, including less depression and higher self esteem, less loneliness, greater relational maturity, and greater psychosocial competence.¹ Likewise, in their recent taxonomy of character strengths and virtues, Peterson and Seligman acknowledge that spirituality has been empirically linked to a range of human virtues, including forgiveness, kindness, and compassion.² However, these authors also recognize that the nature of the relation between spirituality and these virtues merits further investigation. Moreover, in spite of the growing clinical and research emphasis on spirituality and its relationship to psychological well being and character values, its worth has been traditionally neglected in the context of education. Research on faculty spirituality and its link to personal relational values, such as teaching role and interactions with students, has been especially limited and hampered by a lack of empirically validated methods of assessment. This study was designed to address both of these gaps in the literature: 1) by constructing a faculty spirituality measure that includes both explicit transcendence as well as the virtues of altruism, openness, passion, generosity, and temperance; and 2) by assessing the associations between spirituality and teaching style based on student perceptions.

The prevailing ethos for education and pedagogical practice in the United States has, for a number of years, been focused on students' academic attainment, mastery of basic subject matter, and development of test-taking abilities, at the neglect of their social, emotional, and spiritual growth.³ Higher education institutions, at undergraduate and graduate levels have further advanced an emphasis on intellectual attainment and academic performance, often at the expense of other inherent aspects of psychological development, such as creativity, affect, interpersonal values, and spirituality.⁴ The emphasis on the development of theoretical knowledge, empirical research, and evidence-based practice is pervasive of the goals, programs, curriculum, instruction, and overall climate of many universities and colleges.⁵

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The status and recognition of universities are often linked to the number of research grants received, the extent of scholarly publications, admission test scores, student academic performance outcomes, and other quantifiable objectives. The less readily observable psychological effects of moral value development and spiritual growth are often seen as secondary, even if nominally stated as a philosophical purpose of the institution. Although, this is true primarily of non-sectarian higher education settings, a number of religious institutions have become secularized over the years or are subject to pressures against promoting spirituality as part of their mission.⁶

A recent paradigm shift coming from emerging research on spirituality as a universal and integral aspect of human experience (beyond religious boundaries) has led to greater recognition of its importance for psychology and education.⁷ A number of educators and psychologists have argued for greater responsiveness to the role of spirituality among students and faculty, as an integral part of the mission and climate of higher education. Tobin expresses the construct of spirituality as "...who we are and how we know the world and [thus as] integral to an education for meaning, social justice, character, depth, and wisdom."⁸ Buttery & Roberson posit that the spiritual dimension in higher education can be embedded in every discipline and may be connected to nearly every aspect of the curriculum.⁹

According to Tisdell, spirituality in higher education is related to setting a tone (relational in nature) that fosters transformative processes of learning and moves students toward greater authenticity.¹⁰ As such, it is proposed that spirituality may be facilitated by teacher attitudes and interactions with students in the context of the learning process. It, thus, becomes salient for research to attempt to understand faculty spirituality and its role on the teaching and learning process and in relation to students' own spirituality.

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), as part of a major national study on student perceptions of spirituality, developed norms based on survey findings for 40,670 faculty at 421 colleges and universities on their attitudes on the nexus between spirituality and higher education. An aspect of this study was focused on faculty's perceptions of their own spirituality and its relation to a number of social and teaching role related values. Faculty spirituality was assessed based on ratings of personal spiritual values, such as engagement in self-reflection, having a meaningful philosophy of life, and integrating spirituality in everyday life experiences. Faculty who rated high on spirituality, in comparison to those whose rating was low, were more likely to endorse civic-minded values (41% vs. 16%), advocate diversity (33% vs. 12%), focus on student personal development (43% vs. 5%), adopt a student-centered pedagogy (28% vs. 12%) and have a more positive view of their own personal life in connection to their work (59% vs. 36%) as mentors and teachers.¹¹

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Aside from the above major landmark study, the literature on faculty spirituality and/or on teaching style in higher education is scarce and focused primarily on specific methods of discipline, didactic vs. interactive methods of instruction, passive-active styles of relating, and issues of hierarchical power (expert vs. referent). Students predominantly prefer teachers who are dynamic and engage them in interaction. The professor's attitude of concern and interest towards the student is also important.¹²

In sum, there is growing advocacy for the salience of spirituality in higher education and emerging conceptual and research bases for assuming that faculty may play a significant role in transmitting spiritual values through student-centered attitudes and teaching methods. It has been argued that educators have a responsibility to nurture the soul (their own and their students) through their teaching, and to inform their teaching strategies, classroom management skills, etc., with this soul work.¹³ However, there are virtually no comprehensive valid measures of faculty spirituality and there is limited empirical support for the relation between faculty spirituality and teaching style from students' perspectives.

The purpose of this study was to extend research in this area by assessing faculty spirituality, through the development of an ecologically valid measure based on students' perceptions, and to determine the relationship or congruence between faculty spirituality and teaching style as perceived by students in a Jesuit urban institution of higher learning. The primary aim of this study was to test the construct validity and factor structure of this new measure of faculty spirituality. The first hypothesis was that faculty spirituality would be a significant predictor of effective teaching styles, specifically attractive, interpersonally sensitive, and task-oriented styles.¹⁴ Secondly, it was hypothesized that faculty spirituality would predict their teaching styles above and beyond students' own spirituality and religiosity.

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