

Exploring Student Spirituality: A Survey Creation Project with Multifaith Services

Background

University is often a time of great personal growth. Students consistently encounter various perspectives, and are encouraged to critically grapple with this plethora of ideas. Questions of faith, meaning, and suffering may emerge, warranting appropriate support from the university institution. My own student spiritual journey has encouraged me to explore spiritual life and spiritual services on campus. As spirituality scholars Astin, Astin and Lindholm write, "higher education should attend more to students' spiritual development, because spirituality is essential to students' lives" (2010). Religious and spiritual services at UVic provide one avenue of support for student spiritual life. In joining with Multifaith Services to create a spirituality survey, I embarked on a learning journey about the diverse experiences of spirituality on campus.

Literature Search

The value of an "inclusive campus religious climate" is asserted across the literature on students and spirituality (Bowman, Rockenbach & Mayhem, 2015, p.35). Scholars note the importance of institutions that uphold an ecumenical approach to religion and spirituality, particularly in culturally diverse contexts. It is also noted that the "secular norms" of academia have not always provided a supportive climate for spiritual dialogue (Todd, 2013, p.151).

Ultimately, scholars assert that institutional openness to existential and spiritual concerns is essential for increasing spiritual literacy, and in providing support as students traverse these tender topics.

Astin, Astin and Lindholm's 7-year research project exploring the role of higher-education in student spiritual life is a key piece in the literature. (2011). Nearly 15,000 American students were surveyed, resulting in several conclusions. These include:

- ❖ Religious engagement declines in university, but spiritual qualities grow
- ❖ Exposure to diversity contributes to ecumenical worldviews
- ❖ Meditation and self-reflection are valuable tools for spiritual development

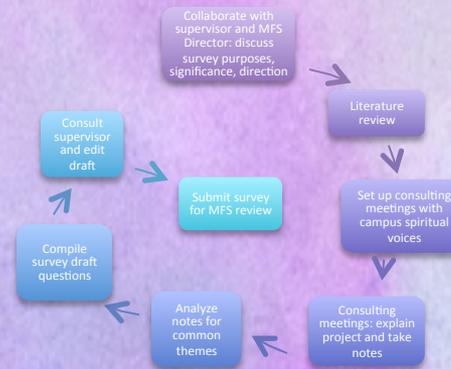
Study Purposes

- ❖ Gather information on students' spiritual needs
- ❖ Equip chaplains and administrators with meaningful information
- ❖ Address information gap: there has yet to be a survey focused on student perspectives on these services, and on spiritual wellbeing in general

The Survey

My interest in the spiritual lives of university students led me to connect with UVic's Multifaith Services (MFS). We fashioned a research project—a comprehensive spirituality survey for students that could guide MFS's future work.

Research Process



Survey Themes

I was able to derive several question themes from my consulting meetings with various campus spiritual voices:

- ❖ Religious/spiritual "literacy" questions: considers knowledge of religion and/or spirituality and interest in learning about this area
- ❖ Multifaith Services questions: considers UVic MFS's role, accessibility, and impression
- ❖ Safety and comfort questions: considers sense of safety regarding spirituality on campus
- ❖ Religious and/or spiritual services questions: considers more general ideas about students' spiritual lives and needs
- ❖ Demographic questions: considers general demographic information regarding spirituality

UVic's MFS provides religious and spiritual support and education in collaboration with student groups and services within a framework of mutual respect for religious and spiritual diversity.

Survey Construction Challenges

I found myself grappling with several considerations in survey construction:

- ❖ Providing for "fill in the blank" answers as opposed to prescriptive answers. With regards to spiritual and religious identities, definitions can be quite contested. As such, allowing for self-identification is ideal.
- ❖ Use of the term "spiritual support person/staff" as opposed to "chaplain". The term "chaplain" can have non-inclusive connotations and may not be inviting.
- ❖ Allowing for optional plurals in "religion(s) and spiritual tradition(s)": this language is inclusive of those who have multiple religious and/or spiritual identities.
- ❖ Placing demographic questions at the end of the survey so as to avoid distancing participants with such questions at the beginning of the survey.

Conclusions

This survey creation project allowed for valuable learning around research methods. I practiced consulting, unstructured interviewing, and theme analysis of qualitative data. I carefully and critically compiled a survey and edited the draft with the input of my supervisor.

As Student Affairs and Multifaith Services move forward, it is my hope that the distribution of this survey will provide meaningful insight for the development of **welcoming, accessible spiritual spaces** for the UVic community.

References

- Astin, A., Astin, H. & Lindholm, J. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: how college can enhance students' inner lives*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bowman, N., Rockenbach, A. & Mayhem, M. (2015). Campus religious/worldview climate, institutional religious affiliation, and student engagement. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 51, 1.
- Bowman, N. & Small, J. (2012). Exploring a hidden form of minority status: college students' religious affiliation and well-being. *Journal of college student development*, 53, 4.
- Bryant, A. & Astin, H. (2008). The correlates of spiritual struggle during the college years. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79, 1.
- Edwards, M. (2006). *Religion on our campuses: a professors' guide to communities, conflicts, and promising conversations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Karlin-Neuman, P. & Sanders, J. (2013). Bringing faith to campus: religious and spiritual space, time, and practice at Stanford University. *Journal of College & Character*, 14, 2.
- St. John, E. & Parrish, D. (2012). Creating discursive space for religion and spirituality in universities: a review essay. *Christian Higher Education*, 11, 2.
- Todd, A. (2013). Preventing the neutral chaplain?: the potential impact of anti-extremism policy on prison chaplaincy. *Practical Theology*, 6, 2.