Editors’ Notes

Eight years ago, while introducing an issue of New Directions for Student Services on the topic of student spirituality, Jablonski (2001) stated that the reason for publishing the issue was that “student affairs and student affairs preparation programs have been reluctant to address spirituality . . .” (p. 1). In the intervening years, the topic of spirituality has become ubiquitous in student affairs and higher education. As demonstrated by numerous articles in About Campus (for example, Lindholm, 2007), Liberal Education (for example, Adler, 2007), and the Journal of College Student Development (for example, Love, Bock, Janmarone, and Richardson, 2005). Books have been written on the topic (for example, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006), both NASPA and ACPA have dedicated entire conferences to the issue, the Higher Education Research Institute (2004–2005) has undertaken a national longitudinal study of spirituality and college students, and the theme has been approached in student affairs preparation programs (Rogers and Love, 2007). Indeed, student affairs has moved forth with the unquestioned assumption that spirituality is a one-size-fits-all concept for working with students, while the definitions of religion and spirituality have become conflated and even contested (Goodman and Teraguchi, 2008).

This volume of New Directions for Student Services seeks to further the profession’s understanding of spirituality and student affairs practice by focusing on intersections of religious privilege that lead to difficult dialogues. The chapter authors highlight the historic, current, and potential conflicts between those who practice a religion and those who do not, as well as capture the differences between those who are part of a privileged religion versus those who practice in a marginalized religion. In addition to describing the conflicts, the authors share practical suggestions on how to manage difficult dialogues surrounding these topics.

The basic theme behind this volume is inspired by three questions: What inequities exist between the religious and nonreligious, as well as the privileged and marginalized religions? What are the historical and potential conflicts caused by these inequities? And what can student affairs professionals do to cultivate an environment that supports productive dialogue on issues surrounding religious privilege? As informed by Fried (2007) and for the purposes of this volume, religious privilege is a dominant worldview whereby nonsecular values, beliefs, and practices are unconsciously accepted and where secular or nondominant (that is, Islam, Judaism, atheism) belief systems are marginalized.
We assume that by engaging students, faculty, and staff in these difficult dialogues regarding different aspects of religious privilege, student affairs practitioners will be expanding students’ critical thoughts and providing fuel for their search for purpose and meaning in life. Furthermore, we hope that the practical strategies shared here will help student affairs practitioners engage students in dialogue that will move them beyond debates about good and evil on this topic and toward more nuanced understandings and appreciation of difference.

In Chapter One, Ellen E. Fairchild sets the context by describing the historical context of Christian and religious privilege that is important to interactions on campuses today. In Chapter Two, Tricia A. Seifert and Noël Holman-Harmon provide the results of a survey that sheds new light on how student affairs professionals define their spirituality relative to student affairs practices.

Chapters Three through Eight focus on specific student populations. Dafina Lazarus Stewart and Adele Lozano explore the ways that cultural and religious traditions may overlap and intersect in the identities and meaning-making processes of students of color in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, Warren J. Blumenfeld and Jacqueline R. Klein discuss the challenges Jewish students on campus face. In Chapter Five, Richard W. McCarty provides suggestions for discussions navigating difficult dialogues that intersect the deeply personal nature of religious and sexual identity. In Chapter Six, Saba Rasheed Ali and Elham Bagheri describe Muslim college students and provide suggestions for ways to combat hostility toward Islamic religious groups. In Chapter Seven, Kathleen M. Goodman and John A. Mueller illustrate the stigmatization of atheist students and suggest ways for practitioners to understand and respond to this group, which may appear invisible.

In the final chapter, Sherry K. Watt discusses specific strategies for addressing defensive reactions often displayed during difficult dialogues surrounded by religious privilege.

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References


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