Received 4 August 2017
Revised 11 December 2017
Accepted 29 January 2018

# Positing a framework for cultivating spirituality through public university leadership development

Shannon Irene Nolan-Arañez
*Office of Student Life and Leadership, California State University San Marcos, San Marcos, California, USA and*
*Department of Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA, and*
Marilee Bresciani Ludvik
*College of Education, San Diego State University, Del Mar, California, USA*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Similar to religion, spirituality is considered a private affair along with issues of faith, hope, and love (Palmer, 1998). American public education has been reluctant to address such issues due to our cultural norm of "separation of church and state" (Love and Talbot, 2000, p. 1) yet the American Council for Education calls upon higher education to provide students ways to explore their personal values, world beliefs, and spirituality (Chickering *et al.*, 2006; Dalton and Crosby, 2006). As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore student leaders' perspectives on how leadership development activities influenced their sense of spirituality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative case study design was used to explore responses from ten student leaders who completed a leadership development program in the Spring 2015 at a public four-year institution. As part of the leadership development program, students were paired a peer mentor while they completed leadership workshops, a reflection paper, self-assessment, and an ongoing community service project painting murals with individuals who have intellectual disabilities. Participants were from various majors and religious backgrounds and had completed the leadership development program two months prior to their participation in this study.

**Findings** – Findings revealed that leadership workshops, self-assessment, reflections, peer-to-peer mentorship, and an ongoing shared community service project, influenced students' perspectives of spirituality and their leadership identity. Student leaders both did and did not differentiate the developmental process of leadership from the spiritual development process, defining both as cognitive and emotional development deeply grounded in self-awareness. Study participants shared that through self-reflection, developing their inter and intra personal skills through conducting service, shaped their understanding of their spiritual identity and developed their sense of self.

**Research limitations/implications** – Study results are not generalizable but provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of student leaders on two hard-to-define topics: spirituality and leadership. The order of the interview questions may have influenced the thought process leading up to student's responses connecting spirituality and leadership concepts. Another limitation is that the leadership activities were designed and coordinated by the lead investigator. Hence, there may be findings that were influenced by the investigators' personal beliefs about leadership. Study participants may have also felt more comfortable discussing their beliefs about spirituality because of their familiarity with the lead investigator.



It may be that providing the opportunity for an ongoing civic engagement project such as a leadership program coupled with creating a project with a marginalized community is an innovative and intentional technique to foster spiritual development among college students.

Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning
Vol. 11 No. 1, 2018
pp. 94-109
Emerald Publishing Limited
2397-7604
DOI 10.1108/JRIT-08-2017-0018

**Practical implications** – Results support the notion that non-faith based public institutions may intentionally support the spiritual development of students through the context of leadership development program activities. Approaching spiritual and leadership development through Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship allows students to experience new activities coupled with personal self-reflection, to deepen their self-understanding, compassion for others, and self-awareness. This learning is an ongoing process that expands as students engage in contemplative practices such as mindfulness training provided through leadership workshops, self-reflection, and peer-to-peer interactions and self-assessment.

**Social implications** – This case study illustrates that intentionally designed and implemented leadership development programs may cultivate both the spiritual and leadership identities and behaviors of students. Also, this study reveals that spirituality and leadership are not mutually exclusive processes because both are deeply rooted in connecting to our community, connecting to our greater purpose and our higher consciousness about who we are and how we treat others. Hence, this work may support educators develop more compassionate and empathetic students who are agents of positive social change.

**Originality/value** – This qualitative case study suggests a new framework for public institutions to support students' leadership and spiritual development through the theoretical framework of self-authorship. As such, educators can stop being fearful about discussing religion, spirituality, and matters of the heart if they use this framework to design leadership developmental activities.

**Keywords** Leadership development, Public four-year institutions, Self-authorship, Spiritual development

**Paper type** Case study

## Why do we need to foster spirituality among college students?

Spirituality has been defined as a lens through which people construct meaning and understanding of universal rules about kindness, civility, relativity, and perseverance (Stewart *et al.*, 2011; Tisdell, 2001). Like religion, spirituality may be considered a private matter along with issues of faith, love, and hope (Palmer, 1998). Americans' reluctance to address spirituality from a public education standpoint stems from spirituality's association with religion, which challenges our cultural norm of "separation of church and state" (Love and Talbot, 2000, p. 1). Such expectations of separation can often make educational leaders uncomfortable and challenged to create curriculum that does not favor one religion over another or one world perspective over another (Bolman and Deal, 2001; Collins *et al.*, 1987).

Beyond our cultural norm of secular education, traditional Western culture values positivistic, empirical, and objective knowledge, leaving little room for spiritual conversations or contemplation (Love and Talbot, 2000). Paradoxically, the American Council for Education holds that a main objective of the student affairs profession is to value holistic student development including the exploration of personal values, spiritual development, and beliefs about the world (Chickering *et al.*, 2006; Dalton and Crosby, 2006; Love and Love, 1996; Stewart *et al.*, 2011). Although practitioners and scholars have been advocating that institutions are more intentional with cultivating students' spiritual development (Chickering *et al.*, 2015; Palmer, 1998; Rendón, 2000) very few tools have been created to actually help educators facilitate that process for students. Hence, if educators are expected to cultivate the "whole student" they must be empowered with the tools or resources to do so in an explicit and well-thought out way (Astin *et al.*, 2011). Psychology may be the only socially acceptable way to heal unless approached from a cognitive psychology perspective in which self-authorship, for example, can be nurtured. Self-authorship is the process of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive development theorized by Baxter M. Magolda (2009, 2008) to help students listen to their "inner voice," specifically after experiencing crossroads experiences (Magolda, 2009). By fostering students' spiritual development through self-authorship, student affairs professionals can feel empowered to foster spirituality as long as a specific religion is not being promoted (Love and Talbot, 2000).

Research supports the notion that spirituality is how students discover their values, approach to life, and make meaning of their lived experiences (Astin and Keen, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Gehrke, 2008). Spirituality, approached from a multi-epistemological

perspective, is rooted in human consciousness and how individuals relate to a higher sense of purpose or self, "Great Spirit," "God," or "Universe" (Astin, 2004; Astin and Keen, 2006; Benefiel, 2005; Tisdell, 2001, 2006, 2007; Rockenbach *et al.*, 2015). Hence, leadership education may play a role in developing college students' sense of spirituality. In turn, leadership programs such as the one examined here could play a role in student's interpretation and engagement of the world as leaders and in developing leadership capacity (Astin and Keen, 2006; Benefiel, 2005; Tisdell, 2001, 2007; Rockenbach *et al.*, 2015).

## Purpose

In teaching leadership from a multi-epistemological perspective, we suggest that educators may be intentionally support students' leadership and spiritual journey while also not marginalizing certain faiths or religious preferences. We suggest that by framing leadership as a journey toward deeper self-awareness and connected to community, we may also be cultivating the skills that employers demand and fostering students' spiritual development. For the purpose of this research, we are using the terms identity development and journey interchangeably because we assume that leadership programs directly influence spirituality, spiritual identity and leadership identity through facilitating students ability to lead their lives (Magolda, 2009). Leadership programs that utilize Magolda's (2009) model of self-authorship for integrative pedagogy help students construct meaning from their experiences lending to new understanding and self-awareness (Komives *et al.*, 2006). Some leadership activities which challenge students to stretch their perceptions of the world (such as working with disabled individuals to paint murals) may be referred to as a "crossroads" experience (Magolda, 2009). A crossroads experience is an experience where a student is challenged to follow their own expectations and dreams despite torn between what they want vs what others may want for them (p. 4). Leadership activities are a medium to providing students with crossroads experiences so that they are able gain insights and be encouraged to internal validation and to follow their own source of happiness. Students who navigate through crossroads experience using their own internal mechanisms are able to ultimately recognize that their own fulfillment depends on themselves and not outside forces such as other's approval or validation.

If spirituality is important to cultivating sound leadership skills, do we know how to foster it, particularly in public higher education systems? What do student leaders experience that may inform educators about what is already being done on college campus' to nurture spirituality? In this study, we explored how participation in leadership activities influence students' spirituality via their progression through Baxter Magolda's stages of self-authorship, which we assumed, ultimately facilitates spiritual understanding (spirituality), spiritual and leadership identities and the capacity to lead . This case study explored student leaders' perspectives on how leadership development activities influenced their sense of spirituality and more specifically, how participating in a shared community service project as part of the leadership program influenced their sense of leadership and spirituality.

Participants engaged in a weekly civic engagement project painting murals with individuals with intellectual disabilities. This study investigated the influence of this shared community service activity students' definitions of spirituality and leadership assuming that the project is a way to provide student leaders with meaningful crossroads events (Magolda, 2009). The researchers also sought to discover whether engagement in the community service activity fosters spirituality. The leadership program under investigation provides students with opportunities to gain deeper insight, knowledge, and skills. It is expected that these results will encourage student affairs professionals to honor various religious and faith preference, while also understanding that this approach to fostering spirituality may be time and resource intensive. In turn, we hope to alleviate the confusion

about how spirituality can be experienced by students at a public institution and how educators can create environments that foster spirituality as a dimension of diversity and as an aspect of leadership development, specifically at non-faith based institutions.

## Leadership program overview

The leadership program that was analyzed in this study was developed in 2007 as a platform for student leadership development. The aim of the leadership program is to provide students with a safe learning environment to practice leadership skills on and off campus. It is a co-curricular initiative offered annually at a mid-size regional state institution in the southwestern part of the USA. The program enrolls approximately 200 diverse students each year. Students who are enrolled in the program are required to complete a minimum of 30 hours of leadership development activities within one or two semesters depending on their schedules and ambitions.

Enrollment into the program begins with a peer-to-peer enrollment meeting between the new student and a graduate from the program called a peer leader. Peer leaders coach new students on how to set specific measurable attainable realistic and timely (SMART) goals relating to their major and career and discuss students' self-assessment results (Conzemius and O'Neill, 2009). The leadership program contains several typical components found in most leadership programs, such as leadership workshops, student mentorship, reflection, and resume writing. This leadership program is uniquely innovative by hosting a weekly ongoing and shared community service project for students to meet their hours of civic engagement. The project is built into the weekly schedule for students and although not mandatory, students who attend the mural project three or more times are also given a certificate of acknowledgment from a United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioner and document the experience on their resume and LinkedIn profiles. Students enjoy the project and attend regularly, reportedly because the project is fun yet challenging. From a self-authorship perspective, the civic engagement project exemplifies a "crossroads" experience because students are challenged to work with people unlike themselves and they are challenged to expand their understanding of themselves and others with intellectual disabilities.

Ultimately, the goal of the community service project is to support students' journey from leading authority-dependent experience to a self-authored experience. Although they are trained on how to work with the clients, they are not directed on the specific needs of each client – they have to sense and be there to support the client in order to paint. Students are then asked to reflect on the experience and how it relates to community, their sense of self, and leadership. In this sense, the program coordinator is educating students on how to cope with the initial discomfort of working with the clients. As such, the relationship between the educator and students is a "partnership" which empowers students to lead their own lives (Magolda, 2009).

Supporting students' journey toward self-authorship includes helping them secure internal commitments by listening to their internal voice. The program accomplishes this through another innovative approach. All leadership program students are required to take a TypeFocus personality assessment, which is an abbreviated MyersBriggs Personality Type Indicator. The TypeFocus must be completed before the student enrolls into the program with their leadership program peer leader. Peer leaders are trained on how to analyze the results with their students and to coach students on how to leverage their results by getting involved in specific campus and off-campus activities, which align with their MBTI. Students set specific major related goals with their peer leader so that students begin to author their own college experiences knowing that they are supported by their peer leader and that their journey is reinforced by the program activities. Table I illustrates how the leadership program activities are aligned with Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship.

| Program activities | Alignment with self-authorship |
|---|---|
| TypeFocus Personality Assessment (Abbreviated MBTI) | Moving toward self-authorship: listening to the internal voice and cultivating the internal voice |
| Enroll with a peer leader to set SMART goals relating to major, career, and personal life | Moving toward self-authorship: listening to the internal voice and cultivating the internal voice |
| Attend a minimum of 7 leadership workshops facilitated by different faculty and staff | Building a self-authored system: trusting the Internal Voice |
| Conduct a minimum of 7 hours of civic engagement (i.e. weekly mural project) | Building a self-authored system: trusting the internal voice building an internal foundation |
| Conduct a minimum of 7 hours of campus engagement (i.e. participating in a student organization) | Building a self-authored system: trusting the internal voice building an internal foundation |
| Create a LinkedIn profile based off career center critiqued resume | Building a self-authored system: securing internal commitments |
| Write a concise 2-3 page reflection paper | Building a self-authored system: building an Internal Foundation and Trusting the Internal Voice |
| Participate in a panel exit interview with community leaders, faculty, and staff | Building a self-authored system: listening to the internal voice |

**Table I.** Leadership development program activities and self-authorship alignment

The leadership program activities detailed in Table I are designed to intentionally challenge students to articulate their learning in both written and oral form and to practice leadership in different settings, especially when working with diverse individuals and teams to accomplish a goal. The following research questions were investigated:

*RQ1.* How does this leadership program activities influence students' understanding of leadership and spirituality as interwoven identities?

*RQ2.* How did participating in a shared community service project as part of the leadership program influence students' leadership and spirituality?

## Theoretical framework for fostering spiritual development: self-authorship

Deep learning is the developmental process of making meaning that takes into account the interpersonal skills one develops out of life's experiences (Marx and Gates, 2016). This process of meaning making, particularly as it relates to fostering leadership and spiritual development can be understood using the theory of self-authorship as a framework (Magolda, 2009). Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1947/1950) suggested that humans personally grow after they move beyond a particular understanding with new experiences, thereby changing that understanding based on one's reaction and perception of new information (Magolda, 2009). The intertwining of life's experiences and the co-existence of multiple perspectives is the essence of Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship (Hodge *et al.*, 2009).

The three developmental phases of self-authorship are: moving toward self-authorship, building a self-authored system, and moving beyond self-authorship (Hodge *et al.*, 2009; Magolda, 2009). The theory of self-authorship takes into consideration the complexities of human experience and is therefore not linear, but cyclical. Individuals move toward increasing levels of self-authorship but can be at any phase at a given time, depending on personal characteristics. These characteristics are the result of socialization based on engagement with as traveling, relationships, sexual orientation, gender, faith orientation, ethnicity, or race (Torres and Hernandez, 2007). These personal characteristics influence individuals' actions and perceptions of global issues (e.g. presidential campaigns, economic down turn) and personal life experiences (e.g. health, relationships, career choice). Self-authorship focuses on the development and expression of one's internal voice that occurs during ones' twenties and thirties.

Individuals typically move between phases as they make meaning out of experiences (Hodge, *et al.*, 2009; Magolda, 2009). In the process of design, we assumed that the theory of self-authorship is the quintessential vehicle to better understand the process of spiritual development (deep learning) or the soul's journey of embracing intuition, diversity of perspective, diversity of others and honoring the authentic self.

In alignment with the theory of self-authorship, students' involvement in community service has also been found to develop ethical reasoning and morality (Eva and Sendjaya, 2013). Astin and Sax (1998) surveyed 3,450 students from 42 institutions around the country. Their results revealed that participation in civic engagement activities enhanced student's development and sense of civic responsibility. Moreover, participants reported that engaging in service strengthened their commitment to pursuing their life goals and being committed to solving social issues (Astin and Sax, 1998). This study also revealed that students who participated in as little as one hour a week of service were more interactive with faculty, spent more time studying, and had higher grade point averages than nonparticipants. Conducting service also positively influenced participants' cognitive processes. Participants reported their knowledge and preparation for graduate school was significantly stronger than their counterparts and they displayed significant increases in leadership and self-confidence than nonparticipants.

Confidence also relates to students' journey to self-authorship. Educators can partner with students to provide essential support to help them face challenges.

By facing a challenge students can learn how to strengthen their internal voice, which gives them the answers to their problems, and to be bold enough to hold this prerogative despite external pressures (Magolda, 2009). Magolda (2009) defines educators as learning partners who, "promote students internal voices and enhance their ability to handle ambiguity (p. 275). Educators are respectful and affirming to students as they express their internal thoughts and they know when to provide challenge. Hence, the role of an educator is to provide students with enough autonomy for them to gain experience cultivating their own internal thoughts (voice) during challenging (crossroads) experiences.

The leadership development program examined in this case study was designed to foster students' progression through self-authorship by infusing civic and campus engagement service hours and reflection about how these experiences connected to leadership concepts students learned during workshops. Students were invited to volunteer at an optional ongoing weekly service project where they painted murals with individuals who have intellectual disabilities. The community service occurred on a weekly basis off-campus at a non-profit that supports adults with intellectual disabilities and helped student leaders meet their seven minimum hours of civic engagement. Each week, student leaders were paired with clients to paint canvased murals in the wake of natural and human disasters such as Umpqua Community College's mass shooting which occurred October 2015. The project is recognized by the UNESCO because of its capacity to cultivate world peace through art and educational partnerships. Hence, all mural participants, including those who participated in this case study, learned about UNESCO and earned a UNESCO certificate of appreciation in addition to their leadership certificate.

In addition to civic and campus engagement students completed a minimum of seven highly interactive leadership workshops hosted by diverse faculty, staff, and community leaders. Students enroll in the leadership program by meeting with a their peer leader where they to reflect on their major or career goals and campus and civic engagement opportunities. Peer leaders act as role models for success. They are trained on how to help their student leaders focus on building the skills they need to achieve their goals. Peer leaders are trained on helping students navigate possible ambiguity by listening to them and helping students follow-through on projects.

If spiritual development is the essence of making meaning (Gehrke, 2008; Love, 2001); and effective leaders understand their spiritual beliefs may inform decision-making (Kuh, 1995; Phipps, 2012) how can leadership programs intentionally foster spirituality among college students? Hence, this case study explored students' how leadership activities may have influenced students sense of spirituality and more specifically, how participating may have effected students' sense of leadership and spirituality. The two key research questions investigated were:

*RQ3.* What components of the leadership certificate program cultivated students' sense of spirituality?

*RQ4.* How did participating in a shared community service project as part of the leadership program influence students' sense of leadership and spirituality?

## Methodology

A qualitative case study design was used to explore whether leadership activities within a leadership program can foster college students' spiritual development at a non-faith based public institution in Southern California. The leadership program hosts a variety of co-curricular experiences for students to apply their leadership knowledge and skills in different settings both on and off campus. Students must complete a minimum of seven workshops, seven hours of civic and seven hours of campus engagement in order to earn their certificate. The aim of the program is to provide students with a safe learning environment to practice leadership skills. A case study design best captured students' development of spirituality and leadership as a result of leadership activities, specifically participating in a shared community service project.

### *Data collection strategies*

Three forms of data were collected: in-depth semi-constructed interviews, observation notes from the mural project and leadership workshops, and data analysis of leadership reflection papers insuring triangulation of data. In depth one-on-one interviews were structured by 13 guiding questions. Interviews were recorded on two recording device and saved onto a memory device kept in a locked drawer in a home office. All interviews took place in a private conference room on the university campus. IRB approval was obtained and consent forms were used with each participant. Any concerns or questions were addressed before the interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to the web-based platform, Dedoose for coding. After each interview, the primary researcher summarized and noted key body language and summarized thoughts about the interview as well as their perspective about the student's interview.

The primary researcher noted and coded observer comments in addition to weekly observations and observer comments taken during the mural project and weekly leadership workshops. The primary researcher identified incidences or interactions that appeared to be significant and applied an initial code to capture them. Similar incidents or interactions (based on the initial codes) were grouped and the primary researcher started to make meaning out of the related codes, applying another code to capture the relationship between them. Data were then analyzed using open coding and axial coding to find key themes in the research. Once the initial codes and themes were determined, a re-analysis occurred to check the data for consistency. Researchers finalized themes and identified exemplarily quotes from each theme. Reflection papers were coded first by open coding and then by axial coding to capture key themes and categories of data. Reflection paper codes included students' perspectives of what leadership activities influenced their sense of leadership and spiritual identities and specifically how the mural project influenced their perspective of leadership and spirituality.

This case study's ten participants were Spring 2015 graduates from the campus' leadership development program who participated in the mural project and were recruited by e-mailing the 43 Spring 2015 leadership program graduates. From that recruitment e-mail, 13 students responded with interest in participating in the study, but due to personal circumstances three participants had to withdrawal. Saturation of data was reached by the seventh interview, but all ten interviews were conducted for increased confidence.

*Description of sample*

The ten students who participated in this study were of various majors and religious backgrounds. Three identified as Christian, three as spiritual but not religious, two as Catholic, one as neither spiritual nor religious, and one identified as Agnostic leaning toward Buddhist but not practicing. Overall, study participants were engaged in leadership activities outside of the leadership program with the exception of Nicole, our self-identified Agnostic participant, who was not engaged in any on or off campus leadership roles. Of the ten participants, four were peer leaders starting in the Summer 2015. As peer leaders, students volunteered part of their summer to be trained on mentorship and leadership and helped refine the programs' enrollment and graduation processes. Eight of the study participants identified as female and two identified as male. One male participant identified as Catholic and the other identified as Christian.

*Data analysis*

Data were analyzed using the web-based platform, Dedoose for coding of transcripts and analytic memos. Interviews were coded sequentially with observer comments so that each participant's interview transcript was being analyzed individually. Approximately 200 open codes led to 75 axial codes, 13 categories and ultimately 9 themes using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method started with coding one set of data, reflection papers, then observations, and interview transcripts. The nine condensed themes were: spirituality is defined as mindfulness, spirituality defined as empathy, leadership is defined as mindfulness, leadership is empathy/love; mural project cultivated empathy, peer leader developed sense of self, workshops developed self-awareness, spirituality is having a greater sense of community (beyond self), spirituality is having deeper self-awareness.

## Limitations

Due to constraints of case study design, study results are not generalizable but provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of student leaders on two hard-to-define topics and the potential for leadership development programs to intentionally cultivate spirituality among college students. The order of the interview questions may have influenced the thought process leading up to students connecting spirituality and leadership concepts. Participants were Spring 2015 graduates class of a leadership program at a public institution in Southern California, which inherently limits the scope of this study. Another limitation is that the leadership activities self-assessment, workshops, peer mentorship, reflection papers, and civic engagement, were designed and coordinated the lead investigator. Hence, there could be findings that were influenced by the investigators' personal beliefs about leadership.

Study participants may have felt more comfortable discussing their definitions of spirituality because of their familiarity with the lead investigator. As such, students may have shared perspectives they perceived to be desirable to the investigator, in an effort to please. The lead investigator remained objective as much as possible. All interviews were conducted in a conference room in the office where the leadership program is housed. Hence, the space may have influenced student responses by virtue of being in a leadership designated space rather than a neutral space.

## Findings

Overall, students felt that the leadership development program, particularly that of the community service mural project, influenced how they perceived themselves as leaders. The real names of the participants are not included in our analysis. Participants seemed to be more comfortable identifying themselves first as leaders before they were able to delve into sharing their path toward spirituality. When exploring the third research question, study participants shared that they were able to "identify as a leader thanks to the workshops" (Rady) but more importantly, the workshops facilitated students' "humanitarian perception that we are all part of the same Universe" (Emma). While the participants did not always use the word "spiritual" to define their experience, it can be inferred that words like "Universe" and "humanitarian perception" can be categorized as spiritual in nature.

The "interactive workshops forced (students) to talk and get out of their comfort zone" (Gene) which thereby cultivated their ability to reach out for others and speak up during the workshop activities. It was observed for example, that Gene entered the program very shy. At the beginning of his program, Gene attended all of the workshops and the mural project with one friend and he did not participate until the third week of workshops when the friend was not with him. Gene seemed more confident because, it was assumed, he felt more comfortable in the workshops and at the mural project, he had made new connections and it was clear that is confidence was increasing. Gene later revealed that he grew up Christian, and although he still identifies as Christian, he is in a crisis of faith because he also recently embraced his identity as also being gay. Part of what made him feel confident coming out to his family was the self-acceptance he learned in the leadership program where he "could just be" himself without "judgment or criticism" (Gene). Gene simply "enjoyed working with the clients because they just love and accepted" him into their community. Hence, perhaps part of leadership and spiritual development is to create spaces and experiences where students can be inspired by hearing about other people's lives.

Similarly, spiritual and religious students alike said that the program helped them become more empathetic leaders, thereby more spiritually centered. The majority of participants, the most influential leadership activities that fostered students' sense of spirituality were: peer-to-peer mentorship, the weekly leadership workshops, and the weekly mural project to meet their civic engagement hours.

First, students felt that their peer leader inspired them to stay committed to their goals originally set during their enrollment meeting. Lauren, president of her student organization and leader in her church's college ministry, said that her peer leader "inspired (her) to work toward her short term goals for the program and long-term career goals." Peer leaders are trained on how to coach students through conflict, decision-making, time management, while being active engaged listeners. Another religious participant, Adelle, even felt shared that her peer leader "gave (her) tips on how to stand out to an employer and showcase (herself) professionally." Adelle has become very involved on campus in multiple student organizations and attends church regularly. Since peer leaders and the program coordinator review each student leaders' LinkedIn profile then provide constructive feedback, the students learn that the program is trying to help them succeed beyond completing the program criteria.

The program also helps students achieve personal goals, such as deeper self-awareness. For example, Belle, a Christian participant, shared that one of the workshops about mindfulness and leadership reminded her of something she learned in Bible study that being "present- through prayer or meditation – or anything to slow the mind – helps us not be worried about the past or the future" which will ultimately help us as "leaders make better decisions." Developing interpersonal skills and intrapersonal skills by giving service and being engaged in workshops, students reported gaining deeper self-awareness and thereby, deeper understanding of their spiritual identity. Furthermore, study participants shared

that the leadership program developed their sense of self and spirituality by shaping their leadership style and how they work with others. However, one participant, Emma, who did not identify as spiritual or religious, was observed to engage in behaviors associated with spirituality (empathy, self-awareness, showing a commitment to personal growth and the common good) during the workshops and mural project. Emma was a white female majoring in Nursing who enjoyed yoga, volunteering in her community and being in nature. Emma attended the mural project where she expressed understanding and kindness toward her peers as well as the clients. Even so, she did not identify as a spiritual person nor did she at first believe that the leadership program helped her develop spiritually. Emma shared that the program helped her become a better person and be "more present in the lives of others around (her)." Similar to Emma, participant John who identified as Catholic, shared that the project "forced them to see themselves as helpers, as leaders, because leaders are the helpers in life" – John.

When exploring the fourth research question, students consistently reported being transformed by the mural project experience. Pauline, who identified as non-religious but spiritual, shared with her later that the program helped her remember that "ALL students have something to offer […] (she) was humbled by other students and remembering that all people are included, every (student) is equal, and valuable." Pauline is also a leader in her department as a teaching assistant, and volunteered to join the peer leadership team where she would mentor current leadership program students. Pauline's narrative of the mural project echoed that of other participants who learned that everyone has a place in this world, a role to fulfill, a purpose. Participants realized that physical ability is one aspect of self, not a definition or self or a necessarily the dominant identity. Participants overall expressed that their identity as a leader is a choice that they make based off confidence they have gained by being involved in leadership activities. Study participants reported having higher levels of happiness and well-being while painting murals with their friends at the non-profit because of the joy they felt co-creating a piece of art.

Overall students shared that working with individuals with disabilities helped them understand that weather one is disabled or not, our similarities spiritually are the same. Rady, who identified as non-religious and spiritual was also a sociology major and graduating senior who shared, "they do look different, like appearance wise, but I think that mentally and spiritually, they are the same as us. Like a persona is a person and love is love." Love was a consistent verb used by study participants. The "loved" the project, "loved" the clients, and "loved" that this was a hands-on leadership experience with their peers. Rady was asked what she meant by "they are the same mentally and spiritually." She shared that after spending time with the clients she learned that she was the one struggling with their disability (at first) and that she was the one who had to learn how to engage – they already knew – and once she understood the commonalities she was able to engage more fully in the activity. The mural project reflected the notion that leadership is about understanding that everyone has an underlying desire to be apart of something greater than themselves.

## Discussion

This study explored how graduates from a leadership development program experienced spirituality through leadership activities. Data analysis revealed that students developed deeper awareness of their spirituality and leadership identity by participating in the leadership development program activities. Findings revealed that leadership workshops, self-assessment reflections, peer-to-peer mentorship, and an ongoing shared community service project, influenced students' spirituality and leadership identity. Students defined both leadership and spirituality as cognitive and emotional process deeply grounded in self-awareness yet differentiated the developmental process spirituality as more of a relationship with a higher

power or connection to a greater life force such as God or the Universe. Most students did not differentiate the developmental process of leadership and spirituality after having engaged in the community service-learning project. One participant, Emma, said that the mural project had an influenced her leadership but not her sense of spirituality.

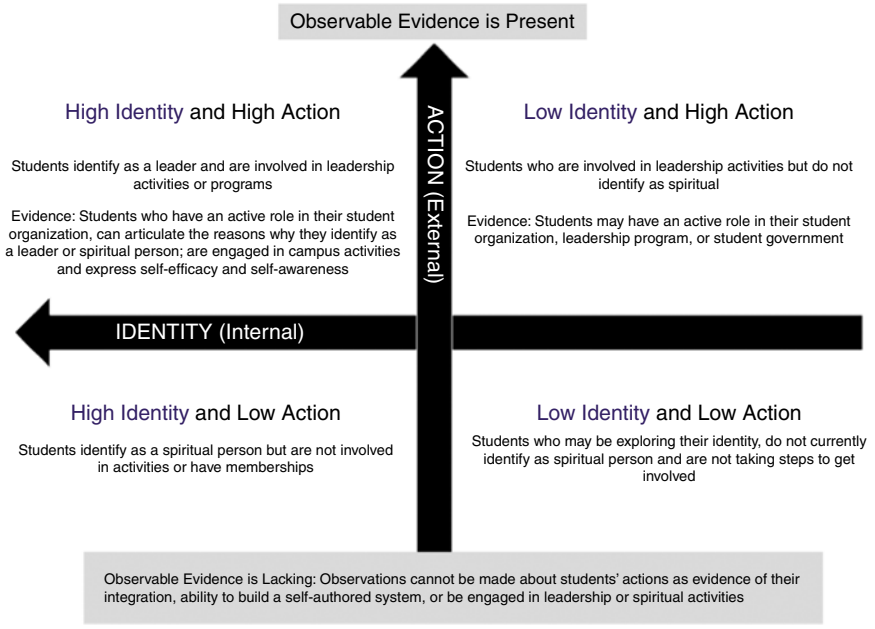
Fields outside of education are exploring spirituality as a means of identity development such as workplace spiritual leadership theory that suggests that there are direct correlations between spirituality, profits, authentic leadership, workplace satisfaction and productivity known as the theory of spiritual leadership (Dent *et al.*, 2005; Benefiel, 2005). The University of California Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institution, conducted a seven-year study examining the role that college plays in facilitating the development of students' spiritual qualities. Not surprisingly, their study found that spirituality is associated with enhanced college student outcomes in academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development and satisfaction in college. Furthermore, Chickering *et al.* (2006) suggest that spirituality is a pedagogical practice, which can be applied, in diverse disciplines such as anthropology, leadership, history, art, and even science. They suggest that learner oriented pedagogy gives students the time and space for deep learning. Practices include reflections, discussions about prior attitudes and emotional reflexes vs surface learning such as quizzes, tests, and assigned papers. Activities such as reflections and discussion help students connect students to prior experiences and new contexts and cultures leads to a deeper learning and an authentic, meaningful college experience (Chickering *et al.*, 2006; Palmer, 2000).

## Implications

This study supports the notion that non-faith based public institutions can intentionally cultivate students' leadership and spiritual identity development using Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship as a framework (Tinto and Pusser, 2006). Researchers indicate that spiritual identity development is an ongoing process, as is the expansion of self-understanding (Tisdell, 2000, 2001; Wilber, 2000). Self-understanding is integral to leadership development (Raffo, 2012; Davis, 2014) and can be achieved through contemplative practices such as mindfulness training to help students be present in the moment (Davis, 2014). Contemplative practices can increase students' capacity for reasoning and as such, may help students relate to one's self, the world, or others (Davis, 2014).

As such, we posit a framework focused on the alchemy of students' self-reported identity as leaders and as being spiritual ($y$ axis) and their action that results from that identify ($x$ axis). Students can either show evidence or non-evidence of leadership and spiritual identity within one of four quadrants: high action and high identity; low identity/high action; the lacking evidence side with: high identity/low action; or low identity/low action. If students have low action in leadership and spirituality, yet report high identity (high identity/low action), it is difficult to ascertain whether they are engaged in accurate self-assessment as their behavior does not appear to match their identity. However, if they report low identity as a leader and also engage in decreased activity as a leader or in behavior they deem spiritual (low identity/low action), then we can accurately evaluate how the program did not contribute to fostering their leadership and spiritual development (Figure 1).

This study illustrates that intentionally designed and implemented leadership programs can cultivate spiritual and leadership development and that those identities and behaviors may not be mutually exclusive. We can better evaluate whether there is evidence of that leadership and spiritual development when students self-report as identifying and acting (e.g. high identity and high action). Nonetheless, even if students do not fully identify (low identity) yet engage in high action, we can see the influence of the program on their behavior.




**Note:** This figure illustrates the relationship between students' action and identity

**Figure 1.**
A framework for leadership and spiritual development

## Recommendations

There are several implications that leaders at higher education institutions may consider in hopes of helping students develop their spirituality. The following ideas and initiatives provide a broad foundation for how spirituality may be cultivated through a leadership development program using Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship as the framework. "Moving Toward Self-Authorship": Baxter Magolda (2009) defined the "Movement Toward Self-Authorship" as a student's ability to listen and cultivate their internal voice. Personalizing leadership programs can foster academic and personal success by helping students stay encouraged and motivated to understand and achieve their goals.

Leadership programs may be the answer for institutions seeking to create more empathic and socially just graduates. We recommend that student leadership programs consider including an ongoing regularly scheduled community service project similar to that explored in this study. The project should take place off campus at an organization that serves at-risk and underserved, underrepresented groups. Students should be expected to engage with the individuals and complete brief reflection summaries after each visit so that the program supervisors can gage the student learning. This will allow students to cultivate relationships with educators and peers that are constructive to their learning. We posit that listening to our internal desires is synonymous with listening to your "gut" or intuition. Baxter Magolda (2009) described as students' ability to listen to and cultivate their internal voice as a movement toward self-authorship. We add that this is the beginning of metacognition: listening to your intuition.

Students who are able to listen to their intuition begin to feel more confident in their ability to build an internal foundation or locus of control (Magolda, 2009) or what Bolman and Deal (2001) defined as, "Leading with the Soul." The true meaning of leadership is to discover your own soul and to empower others to do the same. We recommend five possible techniques that leadership development programs can implement to intentionally cultivate

spirituality: peer-to-peer mentorship; leadership workshops facilitated by diverse faculty, staff, and community members; self-assessments such as TypeFocus Self-Assessment (abbreviated MBTI); and anticipating in shared community service project:

(1) Peer-to-peer mentorship: start by partnering new leadership program students with a peer mentor to coach them through the act of listening to their internal voice. Leadership programs can harness the influence of peers by providing purpose and reflection behind their activities as well as life's events (Dalton and Crosby, 2010; Kuh and Hu, 2001). Peer leaders ideally meet with students to set specific and attainable goals that relate to a student's major or career of choice. Challenging students from the onset of a leadership program to be self-aware and accountable for their actions makes them more empowered to delve deeper into their learning experiences and abilities to move toward their future career path (Magolda and King, 2004; Magolda, 2009).

(2) Leadership workshops: regular ongoing leadership workshops can be facilitated by diverse faculty, staff, and community members illustrates to students that leadership transcends all disciplines and aspects of life. Leadership workshops encourage students to have multiple forms of engagement with individuals from different backgrounds and experiences showing that leadership transcends disciplines, creed, and contexts (Kuh and Hu, 2001; Hurtado *et al.*, 1999; Umbach and Kuh, 2003). Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship suggests that validation from peers, faculty, and staff can increase students' trust in their internal voice as a step toward building a system. Hence, it is important that diverse faculty, staff, and community leaders who can relate to and challenge students' perspectives facilitate leadership workshops and engagement activities where they can engage students in meaningful dialogue (Posner, 2013).

(3) Shared community service project: participating in service demonstrates care for another person regardless of background or creed. Service has been shown to provide personal life experience, strengthen values, and shine a light on students' self-discovery, or what Baxter Magolda (2009) calls a "self-authored system." Our study lends to current literature that completing a shared community service project with reflection has a profound influence on a student's ability to embrace differences in people, navigate challenges, and value the interconnectedness of life. Hence, spirituality can be intentionally cultivated through the act of providing service to others on a regular ongoing basis.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study may empower educators to be more comfortable facilitating students' sense of spirituality irrespective of religion. Students in this study expressed that both spirituality and leadership require levels of self-awareness and a connection to a greater purpose. This study illustrates the capacity for leadership development programs to cultivate students' spiritual development as well as the potential for educators to be more intentional and deliberate in fostering opportunities for students to delve into their spirituality regardless of if they identify as spiritual or exhibit spiritual behaviors.

We believe that having an ongoing civic engagement opportunity such as the mural project is an innovative and intentional technique to foster spiritual development among college students. Having a service project embedded into the context of the leadership program not only allowed students to understand differences but fostered high identity and high action in students' leadership and spirituality. Since spirituality can be perceived as the essence of leadership, and leadership as the expression of spirituality (Astin, 2004;

Love and Talbot, 2000), it makes sense for educators to understand that they may also be intentionally fostering spirituality through the scope of leadership activities. The mural project built trust and confidence within the students and helped them get outside of their comfort zone of only working with like-minded and similarly abled people.

## References

Astin, A.W. (2004), "Why spirituality deserves a central place in liberal education", *Liberal Education*, Vol. 90 No. 2, pp. 34-41.

Astin, A.W. and Keen, J.P. (2006), "Equanimity and spirituality", *Religion and Education*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 39-46.

Astin, A.W. and Sax, L.J. (1998), "How undergraduates are affected by service participation", *Service Participation*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 251-263.

Astin, A.W., Astin, H.S. and Lindholm, J.A. (2011), "Assessing students' spiritual and religious qualities", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 39-61.

Benefiel, M. (2005), "The second half of the journey: spiritual leadership for organizational transformation", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 5, pp. 723-747.

Bolman, L.G. and Deal, T.E. (2001), *Leading with soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Chickering, A.W., Dalton, J.C. and Stamm, L. (2006), *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Chickering, A.W., Dalton, J.C. and Stamm, L. (2015), *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, John Wiley & Sons.

Collins, J.R., Hurst, J.C. and Jacobsen, J.K. (1987), "The blind spot extended: Spirituality", *Journal of College Student Personnel*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 274-276.

Conzemius, A. and O'Neill, J. (2009), *The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning*, Solution Tree Press, Bloomington, Indiana.

Dalton, J. and Crosby, P. (2006), "The neglected inner lives of college students", *Journal of College and Character*, Vol. 7 No. 8, doi: 10.2202/1940-1639.1237.

Dalton, J.C. and Crosby, P.C. (2010), "When faith fails: why nurturing purpose and meaning are so critical to student learning and development in college", *Journal of College and Character*, Vol. 11 No. 3, doi: 10.2202/1940-1639.1720.

Davis, D.J. (2014), "Mindfulness in higher education: teaching, learning, and leadership", *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 1-6.

Dent, E.B., Higgins, M.E. and Wharff, D.M. (2005), "Spirituality and leadership: an empirical review of definitions, distinctions, and embedded assumptions", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 5, pp. 625-653.

Eva, N. and Sendjaya, S. (2013), "Creating future leaders: an examination of youth leadership development in Australia", *Education + Training*, Vol. 55 No. 6, pp. 584-598.

Gehrke, S.J. (2008), "Leadership through meaning-making: an empirical exploration of spirituality and leadership in college students", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 351-359, doi: 10.1353lcsd.0.0014.

Hodge, D.C., Baxter Magolda, M.B. and Haynes, C.A. (2009), "Engaged learning: enabling self-authorship and effective practice", *Liberal Education*, Vol. 95 No. 4, pp. 16-23.

Hurtado, S., Milem, J.F., Clayton-Pedersen, A.R. and Allen, W.R. (1999), *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments: Improving the Climate for Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education*, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University, Washington, DC.

Komives, S.R., Longerbeam, S.D., Owen, J.E., Mainella, F.C. and Osteen, L. (2006), "A leadership identity development model: applications from a grounded theory", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 401-418.

Kuh, G.D. (1995), "The other curriculum: out-of-class experiences associated with student learning and personal development", *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 66 No. 2, pp. 123-155.

Kuh, G.D. and Hu, S. (2001), "The effects of student-faculty interaction in the 1990s", *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 309-332.

Love, P. and Talbot, D. (2000), "Defining spiritual development: a missing consideration for student affairs", *NASPA Journal*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 361-375.

Love, P.G. (2001), "Spirituality and student development: theoretical connections", *New Directions For Student Services*, Vol. 2001 No. 95, pp. 7-16.

Love, P.G. and Love, A.G. (1996), "Enhancing student learning: intellectual, social, and emotional integration", Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University, ERIC Digest, Report No. 4, Washington, DC.

Magolda, M.B. (2008), "Three elements of self-authorship", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 269-284.

Magolda, M.B. (2009), "Authoring your life: developing and internal voice to navigate life's challenges", Stylus Publishing, LLC, Sterling, VA.

Magolda, M.B. and King, P.M. (2004), *Learning Partnerships: Theory and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship*, Stylus Publishing, LLC, Sterling, VA.

Magolda, M.B.B. (2009), "The activity of meaning making: a holistic perspective on college student development", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 50 No. 6, pp. 621-639.

Marx, E. and Gates, L. (2016), "The neuroscience of learning and development: enhancing creativity, compassion, critical thinking, and peace in higher education", in Ludvik, M.J.B. (Ed.), Stylus Publishing, LLC, Sterling, VA.

Palmer, P. (2000), "A vision of education as transformation", *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and a New Vision for Higher Education in America*, pp. 17-22.

Palmer, P.J. (1998), *The Courage to Teach*, Jossey-Bass., San Francisco, CA.

Phipps, K.A. (2012), "Spirituality and strategic leadership: the influence of spiritual beliefs on strategic decision making", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 106 No. 2, pp. 177-189.

Piaget, J. (1947/1950), *The Psychology of Intelligence*, (Trans. by M. Piercy and D.E. Berlyne), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Posner, B.Z. (2013), "It's how leaders behave that matters, not where they are from", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 573-587.

Raffo, D. (2012), "Blogging as a reflective tool for leadership development: an exploratory study of a leadership practicum grounded in the relational leadership model", *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 39-51.

Rendón, L.I. (2000), "Academics of the heart", *About Campus*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 3-5.

Rockenbach, A.N., Mayhew, J.M., Davidson, J., Ofstein, J. and Bush, R.C. (2015), "Complicating universal definitions: How students of diverse worldviews make meaning of spirituality", *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 1-10, doi: 10.1080/19496591.2015.996058.

Stewart, D.L., Kocet, M.M. and Lobdell, S. (2011), "The multifaith campus: transforming colleges and universities for spiritual engagement", *About Campus*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 10-18.

Tinto, V. and Pusser, B. (2006), "Moving from theory to action: building a model of institutional action for student success", National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, pp. 1-51.

Tisdell, E.J. (2000), "Spirituality and emancipatory adult education in women adult educators for social Change", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 308-335.

Tisdell, E.J. (2001), "Toward a culturally relevant and spiritually grounded theory of teaching for social transformation and transformational learning", *Proceedings of The 42 Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Michigan State University*, *East Lansing, MI*, available at: www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001tisdell.htm

Tisdell, E.J. (2006), "Spirituality, cultural identity, and epistemology in culturally responsive teaching in higher education", *Multicultural Perspectives*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 19-25.

Tisdell, E.J. (2007), "In the new millennium: the role of spirituality and the cultural imagination in dealing with diversity and equity in the higher education classroom", *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 109 No. 3, pp. 531-560.

Torres, V. and Hernandez, E. (2007), "The influence of ethnic identity on self-authorship: a longitudinal study of Latino/a college students", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 558-573.

Umbach, P.D. and Kuh, G.D. (2003), "Student experiences with diversity at liberal arts colleges: another claim for distinctiveness", paper presented at the 43rd Annual Forum for the Association for Institutional Research, June, Tampa, FL.

Wilber, K. (2000), *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Shambhala Publications, Boulder, Colorado.

**Further reading**

Astin, A.W. (1999), "Student involvement: a developmental theory for higher education.

Komives, S.R., Lucas, N. and McMahon, T.R. (1998), *Exploring Leadership: For College Students who want to Make a Difference*, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Komives, S.R., Lucas, N. and McMahon, T.R. (2006), *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference* , 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Komives, S.R., Lucas, N. and McMahon, T.R. (2013), *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference*, 3rd ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Zepke, N. (2015), "Purposes, pedagogies and practices in life wide adult education in New Zealand: a preview", *International Review of Education*, Vol. 61 No. 1, pp. 99-113.

**Corresponding author**
Shannon Irene Nolan-Arañez can be contacted at: snolan@csusm.edu