



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 19 | Issue 3

Article 21

May 2016

Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs (Book Review)

Betsy Ackerson
University of Virginia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Ackerson, B. (2016). Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs (Book Review). *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1903202016>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in Journal of Catholic Education by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of Journal of Catholic Education, please email JCE@nd.edu.

Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs (Book Review)

Jenny L. Small, Ed.

Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2015

196 pages; \$29.95USD (paperback) \$23.99USD (e-book) \$95.00 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-62036-276-1 (paperback) 978-1-62036-278-5 (e-book) 978-1-62036-275-4 (cloth)

<https://sty.presswarehouse.com/books/BookDetail.aspx?productID=432449>

Reviewed by Betsy Ackerson, University of Virginia

Spirituality, faith, religion, and life purpose (or vocation) are not new concepts to the Catholic faith. Nor are these new concepts in Catholic higher education—rather they serve as part of their *raison d'être*. As the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) maintains,

a correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to 'how,' but also to 'why,'...restoring to the educational process the unity which saves it from dispersion amid the meandering of knowledge and acquired facts, and focuses on the human person in his or her integral, transcendent, historical identity. (p. 10)

However, over the past two decades, concepts of spirituality, faith, and “meaning making” increasingly have become more accepted across higher education writ large. In *Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs*, Small and her contributors, from their perspectives as student affairs researchers and professionals, document this trend. The book presents a synopsis of the work that has been undertaken by researchers and practitioners since the late 1990s to support both the spiritual development of college students and the corresponding “strong trend toward working for religious and secular pluralism on college and

university campuses” (p. 2). As a whole, the book provides a solid overview of the history of student spiritual development in theory and practice, as well as a thoughtful series of steps to take to further propel the efforts surrounding students’ meaning making. The thorough literature review supports the rationale for the importance of the meaning making process and/or spiritual growth of students during the college years. And, all the contributors advocate the importance of supporting students in answering what one calls the “Big Questions...Who am I? What do I believe? What is the good life?” (p. 61) and suggest ways in which student affairs practitioners and researchers can strengthen their efforts to help students find the answers.

By dividing the book into three distinct sections, each of which can stand on its own, “research and theory,” “professional associations,” and “practice,” readers can easily hone in on a single area of interest with ease. Each chapter also is interwoven with the respective author’s personal narrative or reflections in order to further explain “the how and why” (p. 8) of the history of the growth of interest in spiritual development within student affairs. While this adds an interesting dimension to the book, at times it carries unintended consequences. The section on research and theory, for example, laments the shortage of large-scale research studies from which to draw conclusions and inform practice, and the overabundance of small, qualitative studies, that highlight individual stories. Yet, the book’s emphasis on personal narrative only perpetuates the very problem that the authors seek to amend.

Interwoven throughout many chapters is a presentation of the history of religion and faith in American higher education, including an apt analogy of the institutional emphasis on student spirituality as a pendulum swinging from Protestant sectarianism to ardent secularism, before settling in a more middle-of-the-road balance which we see today. Some historical overviews are more complete than others, and the book would benefit from a consolidation of these repetitive segments. The authors unapologetically endorse religious pluralism as their framework and end goal, and are writing to appeal to a non-sectarian audience. They also are quick to embrace the needs of non-Christian students who hold other spiritual beliefs (or no belief), hence the intentional use of multiple terms to try and capture the essence of meaning making: spirituality, faith, religion, and life purpose. However, this emphasis on the need to support non-Christian students comes at the exclusion of any discussion of Catholic students. (Though, some of the authors might label this assertion as reflective of “Christian privilege.”) For example, while documenting the historic challenges and struggles of non-Christian students in

what once was a predominantly Protestant world of higher education, there is no acknowledgement that Catholic students too experienced such discrimination, and that for many decades Catholic colleges and universities were not regarded with the same level of approbation they now enjoy.

While the book is intended in large part to encourage greater traction from researchers and student affairs practitioners in secular colleges and universities, those involved in Catholic higher education should not be dissuaded from entering into the conversation. In fact, Catholic educators should arguably be among the most ardent voices of those who seek to support students' meaning making in college. As the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) states, "in the pluralistic world in which we live, the Catholic school is in a unique position to offer, more than ever before, a most valuable and necessary service" (p. 91).

The authors do acknowledge that issues surrounding meaning making and student spiritual growth transcend student affairs and directly relate to curriculum, hiring, facilities, and other areas across the university. This reality is well understood and embraced within the tradition of Catholic education: "a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share." (Paul VI, 1965, p. 1) It would behoove those in Catholic education whose work falls outside the scope of student affairs to be aware of the trends and perspectives articulated in the book. In addition to mission officers and campus ministers, other university personnel including faculty, academic leadership, and campus planners, could all benefit from considering the spiritual developmental needs of students. After all, students (Catholic and non-Catholic) attending Catholic colleges and universities are grappling with these very issues. And, as the demographic profile of the students attending Catholic institutions continues to diversify, issues pertaining to spiritual development are likely to increase.

What is lacking in the book is any meaningful discussion of the role of campus ministers in supporting students' individual quests for meaning. The book gives a general nod of acknowledgement that campus ministers are important, but seems to dismiss any further discussion or exploration. Instead, there is an emphasis on how better to train and prepare student affairs professionals "in learning how to do spirituality work" (p. 131) so they might better assist and support students. Certainly additional training might increase awareness, sensitivity, and skills for working with students, but the reluctance of the authors to more fully partner with campus ministers—who almost

always are professionally trained in this area—seems incompatible with the goal of supporting students in their individual quests for meaning.

The growing interest documented in this book surrounding supporting students' spiritual growth and development highlights the continuing relevance of the mission of Catholic education. What once was considered peripheral, is quickly gaining in relevance. Because providers of Catholic education have long understood the need to support and foster students' spiritual growth and development, Catholic educators have much to offer in this arena. Catholic colleges and universities that truly focus on effectively supporting the spiritual lives of their students are poised to truly distinguish themselves, not only for the good of their students, but for the good of the education world at large.

References

- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1998). The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html
- Paul VI. (1954, October 28). *Declaration on Christian education: Gravissimum educationis*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html
- Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). *The Catholic school*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html

Betsy Ackerson, Ph.D. is Manager of Strategic Planning at the University of Virginia. Correspondence regarding this review can be sent to Dr. Ackerson at bva5c@virginia.edu