

Developing an Assessment of College Students' Spiritual Experiences: The Collegiate Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey¹

Alyssa N. Bryant, Contributing Editor, North Carolina State University

Keith Wickliffe, North Carolina State University

Matthew J. Mayhew, New York University

Laurie Bartell Behringer, New York University²

Last November's *Journal of College and Character's* "Spirituality on Campus" essay featured reflections on the growing imperative to assess religious and spiritual dimensions of campus climate, including related initiatives and programs designed to engage students' spirituality. The essay reviewed campus climate literature, discussed emerging "best practices" for spiritually-infused programming, and offered a series of suggestions related to the assessment of each (Bryant, 2008). Building on the ideas generated in the essay, during the past year we initiated a project designed to examine campus climates and religious and spiritual programming in colleges and universities and each program's relationship to college student outcomes. This essay describes our journey toward developing a new assessment tool: The Collegiate Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey.

Funded by a faculty research and professional development grant provided by North Carolina State University, our project commenced in fall 2009 with a series of 27 interviews in four distinct institutional contexts (including a private research university, a public research university, a community college, and a women's college) within the Southeast United States. A total of 14 faculty and staff and 13 students participated in telephone interviews that lasted from thirty to ninety minutes each. The faculty and staff were invited to participate on the basis of their expertise; that is, we identified individuals we believed would be relatively aware of religious and spiritual dimensions of climate (e.g., deans of students, campus chaplains and religious life staff, religious studies professors). We invited students in their third year of college (second year at the community college) to participate to ensure that participants would have had ample exposure to

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² Alyssa Bryant is assistant professor of higher education at North Carolina State University. Her research explores the spiritual development of college students and issues of religious pluralism and spirituality in higher education. Keith Wickliffe is a doctoral student in the Adult and Higher Education program at North Carolina State University where he works in University Housing. Matthew J. Mayhew is assistant professor of higher education at New York University. His research examines collegiate conditions, educational practices, and student experiences that influence learning and democratic outcomes, ranging from moral reasoning to spirituality. Laurie Bartell Behringer is a postdoctoral fellow at the Steinhardt Institute of Higher Education Policy at New York University, where she facilitates the Qualitative Inquiry Collective for doctoral students and pursues research on a number of initiatives, including remedial and developmental education, transfer equity, and innovative entrepreneurship.

campus life and time enough to reflect on campus climate. Our interview questions were informed by the lessons we took from the literature on campus climates pertaining to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, in addition to what we had gleaned about spiritually-related initiatives from both the literature and our awareness of various efforts across the country. For example, we asked students about their backgrounds, the extent to which they identified with religion and spirituality, and whether they had experienced changes in worldview since coming to college. These questions were followed by questions about how participants made meaning of spirituality on campus, interacted with others who espoused a variety of religious and spiritual worldviews, viewed the religious and spiritual qualities of campus climate, and envisioned their campus addressing religion and spirituality as a means to enhancing students' meaningful experiences in college. The faculty and staff interviews were comprised of similar questions, but included a series of items designed to help respondents further reflect on (1) their feelings about and opportunities for spiritual discussions with students; (2) contributing factors to religious and spiritual climates; (3) religious and ideological diversity on campus; and (4) ways to facilitate students' spiritual search and development.

Our analysis of the interview data involved a two-stage coding procedure. First, we coded the verbatim interview transcripts using an analytical scheme that we derived from the campus climate literature. The framework was based upon Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen's (1999) assertion that the climate for diversity is a function of four interrelated elements: the institution's history of inclusion/exclusion of particular groups; structural diversity (i.e., the proportional representation of diverse groups on campus); opportunities for (and quality of) engagement with diversity (behavioral climate); and individual perceptions of, attitudes toward, and experiences with the environment (psychological climate). We elaborated on this four-pronged foundation by infusing evidence from other scholars who have examined campus climates for race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Bryant, 2006; Mayhew, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006; Rankin, 2005; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The resultant framework included the following components:

- Historical and contemporary inclusion/exclusion of various worldviews on campus
- Structural worldview diversity (numerical/proportional representation of different worldview identities on campus)
- Opportunities to engage others with diverse worldviews (behavioral climate)
- Quality of interactions with others on campus around issues of spirituality, religion, and ideology (behavioral climate)
- Religious, spiritual, or ideological conflict on campus (psychological climate)
- Experience of prejudice/discrimination on the basis of one's worldview (psychological climate)
- Positive campus climate around issues of spirituality, religion, and ideology (psychological climate)
- Freedom to express and discuss one's worldview on campus and/or concealment of one's worldview on campus (psychological climate)

The second step in the two-stage coding procedure involved developing open codes directly from interview transcripts. Two members of the research team generated lists of codes based on review of the transcripts, and condensed the initial lists of approximately 25 codes to 16 open codes. Our interviews illuminated the concerns of multiple constituents regarding spiritual, religious, and ideological dimensions of campus climate. Our analysis involved a comparative element in that we sought to contrast climate across four institutional contexts. In the sections that

follow, our findings are organized according to the Hurtado et al.'s (1999) four-part scheme with the intent to highlight emerging constructs particular to the religious and spiritual campus climate.

Extending Existing Campus Climate Frameworks to Include Religious and Spiritual Dimensions

Inclusion/exclusion. Reflecting on the changing religious demographics observed on campuses over the years, faculty and staff often associated these generational patterns or shifts with discussions of inclusion and the campus's willingness to embrace a variety of religious and spiritual worldviews. At one of the institutions, movement away from a distinct denominational heritage coincided with shifts over time toward greater numbers of students claiming worldviews other than Protestant Christianity, as this participant suggested: "I would say historically, it's more than Baptists—more Protestant religions—and now it is diversifying." By comparison, a faculty member from the public research university remarked on the dearth of diversity within the predominately Christian campus ministers' cooperative; the smaller religious groups, though they had a growing presence on the campus, did not have the funds to maintain membership in this group.

According to faculty and staff, there seemed to be growing support from the college or university administration for promoting spiritual and religious awareness, particularly with regard to diversity and inclusion. At the women's college, one participant indicated that there were "visible efforts to make the campus more welcoming in terms of the campus climate and religious diversity." The private research university had similar aims, suggested a campus administrator: "We're putting a bit more weight behind the Catholics. We're putting a lot of weight behind the Muslims. We're putting a lot of weight behind the Jewish community." At the public research university, a faculty member perceived that "some upper administration is definitely trying to respond and deepen these trends [toward pluralism] on campus," but he also provided a critique on behalf of religious and worldview minority students:

From a student affair's perspective or whoever is in charge of the religious diversity and religious awareness, I think [student affairs leaders] need to step up the game a little bit and try to get more out there in terms of the groups that are non-Christian. Be more vocal on their behalf, be more supportive on their behalf, because this [lack of attention to non-Christian students] comes down to the state schools, the government institutions, and there are a fair amount of students who practice faiths other than Christian[ity]— and they're paying to come here.

Because faculty and staff had longer institutional memories, they tended to address historical and contemporary evidence of inclusion and exclusion more often than did students.

Structural diversity. With respect to structural worldview diversity on campus, a number of students noted that no particular group seemed to dominate the religious environment and generally agreed that diversity in religious and spiritual worldviews tended to prevail on their campuses. A few students suggested that evidence of religious diversity stemmed from visible representations of religious faith on campus, particularly those of Muslim women who veiled.

The faculty and staff were less assured that religious diversity, without qualification, was an apt descriptor of campus life. At the public research university and women's college, faculty and staff suggested that although minority religious populations were increasingly present, the region from which both institutions drew students was largely Christian—and the students who enrolled at each of the campuses reflected this regional characteristic. Regarding the women's college, one individual shared:

we draw something in the upper 80 percent of our students from within the state, and when you think about it, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians are the largest denominations in the state. . . we are reflective of the communities from which we draw students.

Nonetheless, a faculty member at the public institution was impressed by the changing ideologies among Christian students; with the addition of progressive thought and action, the Christian constituency on the campus was diversifying within itself: “So looking at it from the outside you could say, ‘Well, this is a 95 percent Christian student population . . . therefore not particularly diverse.’ I think it’s more diverse than that would suggest.” The private research university, which drew enrollments from across the nation and especially from the northeast, was thriving with respect to structural religious diversity: “there are a lot of students from New York, a lot of students from New Jersey It’s got a Northern Catholic influence and a historically Southern school.”

Behavioral climate. Students representing each of the four schools provided examples of their opportunities to engage others from different worldviews. Though structural diversity clearly fluctuated across institutional type, there was nonetheless an adequate “level” of diversity for students of varying worldviews to come into contact. The depth of contact that ensued seemed quite inconsistent from one student to the next. Likewise, the attitudes that students expressed ranged from feeling that religious “others” were unusual to feeling changed for the better by those encounters:

She was strange, but it was different. Although her faith was very close to what I believe, it was just strange the way that she goes about her life.

I had some straight up prejudices because of 9/11 And then to get to know this person . . . she was one of the coolest people that I have met in my entire time at [community college]. That is when I realized once again that sense of community; here was someone who was completely different from me, and so I thought. But then it wasn’t the case. She was more like me than I had thought.

The contexts for engagement with religion and spirituality were quite varied as well. Participants indicated that religion and spirituality could be experienced in multiple spaces, including curricular and co-curricular venues, residence halls, between students, and between students and faculty/staff.

Classroom discussions tended to involve little personal disclosure. Even so, these topics were approached in certain courses, from an academic angle, best illustrated by one student’s quote: “The religion classes are very academic so there’s usually not a lot of discussion about your personal spiritual beliefs.” Faculty member perspectives about the appropriate “place” for religion and spirituality in academe likely contributed to the relative neutrality of the classroom. For the most part, faculty avoided overstepping personal boundaries and revealing too much about their own worldviews. In “walking the line” between academic discourse and personal revelation, faculty described how they exercised caution in their teaching roles:

Since I am in a role of teacher and sometimes mentor, I know that my words have more weight than they might otherwise, so I’m careful.

I don’t try to suppress it, but it’s not what I emphasize.

The classroom is a neutral space. And I find it of the highest value if at the end of the semester . . . I get on a student evaluation, “I have no idea what religion she was.” I find that great if they can’t figure it out. Because that means I’m doing my job, and I am indeed giving the opinion of the various religious traditions in the United States.

Rather than attempt to impart “truth” to students, faculty focused on helping students “learn how to really dig deeper into their own religion or in the religions of others,” “increase their religious literacy,” “make more informed decisions about their own faith,” and enhance their tolerance and respect of others. Faculty and staff were not on the whole entirely opposed to personal discussions, but generally they preferred those conversations to happen outside of the classroom (e.g., during office hours) and only when students approached them first, as expressed by one faculty member: “if people ask me the questions, I am completely comfortable in explaining who I am and why I am.” A faculty member at the community college explained that time limitations were prohibitive for religious/spiritual dialogue: “I would feel quite comfortable doing so, but I guess I’m just busy and doing work!”

With the classroom reserved for discussions of an academic nature, students found they encountered deeper engagement with religion and spirituality elsewhere. Students seemed amenable to the in-class/out-of-class bifurcation that they experienced:

I don’t think that it’s [religion/spirituality] really meant for the classroom, but it’s fine for like clubs and different activities and stuff.

But I do have really good discussions about religion and spirituality with friends both in the Catholic Center and friends in other campus ministries or people in my dorm or just kind of people that I meet. So not so much in the classroom, more outside of the classroom.

The exception to the general rule of out-of-class opportunity for religious and spiritual engagement was offered by participants enrolled at the community college. Community college students who were minimally involved in “college life” aside from their academic pursuits noted classroom encounters were by and large the only occasion for integrating religious and spiritual discussions into their college experience. Illustrating this phenomenon one student shared, “I mean I don’t really talk to that many other students on a daily basis. So, generally I would say, no, the bigger questions we usually just leave up to outside school.” Though the subject matter of many courses precluded these discussions, when the community college students shared stories about their religious and spiritual encounters in college they almost always involved dialogues that happened in conjunction with their coursework in various disciplines.

In contrast to the community college, students in the other institutional environments tended to experience religion and spirituality in multiple contexts beyond the classroom. Students, faculty, and staff listed the range of possibilities: interfaith conferences and dialogues, courses on religion and spirituality, speaker forums and lectures, religious awareness weeks, interfaith councils, international faith pilgrimages, hot topic dialogues, student-faculty luncheons and teach-ins, chapel services, and mission trips. Two additional opportunities participants noted most often as sites for exposure to religion, spirituality, and worldview diversity were student religious organizations and residence halls.

When asked to describe the religious and spiritual climate of their campus or examples of their engagement with these dimensions, many students identified student religious organizations as a prime mechanism for religious and spiritual involvement. Students described these organizations as generally welcoming and as evidence of a campus that was spiritually “open.”

Some student, faculty, and staff participants expressed concern that Christian organizations tended to dominate the campus, while others wondered whether these groups could realistically meet the needs of students following a spiritual path but not a particular religious faith. A campus minister conceded,

I haven't figured out how to respond to spiritual seekers [who are] against institutionalized religion—I think that's coming from a really good place. It also feels very individualistic to me so it's hard for me as a . . . religious professional if you will, or as a clergy person, to figure out exactly the best ways to encourage that kind of spiritual seeking.

Others noticed a propensity for division that precluded intergroup engagement:

Every group kind of has their own worship, has their own meetings. There's not a lot of everybody coming together.

Groups tend to try to find each other, so the Muslim students are going to seek each other out, Jewish students are going to seek each other out 'cause there's just a small amount of that group of students.

I think it's [spirituality or religion] still the hardest thing to talk about, so I think most people still confine conversations about religion to within-community conversations.

At the women's college, a student described the religious/spiritual climate as dormant because it was difficult to find student religious organizations at her institution. For her, lack of information inhibited involvement. Similarly, student religious organizations were virtually invisible at the community college: "It would be nice to see them do something . . . maybe I haven't looked. Maybe there is a religion club. Why aren't they more promoted? Why haven't I seen them?"

For students at the private research university, public research university, and women's college, on-campus residence halls provided a

new experience in being and living in a communal living situation The residence halls throws [sic] them together with a lot of people. They may have a Muslim neighbor down the hall, and their county may not have a single Muslim resident.

In other words, the residence hall experience for many students served as their first up-close-and-personal encounter with people of other worldviews. However, despite the opportunity that the residence hall environment provided, many students' comments suggest mere observation of worldview difference as opposed to deep engagement and exploration amidst differences. In the interviews, students described students who prayed, worshiped, and dressed in ways that were unfamiliar to them, but most of their depictions did not include meaningful examples of discussions that made lasting impressions. In fact, there was some evidence of retreat from difference when religious or spiritual dissonance created discomfort. A Christian student and her lesbian roommate endeavored to find common ground in light of their very different worldviews, but the Christian student sought a roommate whose religious beliefs mirrored her own the next year:

I really prayed for a Christian roommate, then lo and behold this hyper girl comes walking into English class, you know, end of freshman year I guess we kind of

bonded because we do come from the same background . . . being Christian . . . it kind of brings us together because . . . we have the same morals.

Another student indicated intentional avoidance of anyone too devout: “My roommate, we see religion the same way so I don’t really interact with people when they’re kind of stuck in their own religious values.” Students’ gravitations toward “sameness” diminished the valuable opportunity for engagement across worldview differences in the residence halls. Moreover, because of the intimate nature of religious and spiritual dialogues, relational closeness was a necessary precursor to interpersonal disclosure. One student confided, “I can’t really think of an instance where I talked to somebody, like, who I didn’t know.” Without the critical ingredient—“knowing” the other—the potential for meaningful cross-worldview encounters was not likely to be fulfilled.

Psychological climate. Student, faculty, and staff participants shared myriad descriptions of how they saw themselves spiritually and religiously and also spoke to the significance of personal worldview identities and perspectives, as well as family and regional influences, in shaping their experience of campus climate. From this we deduced that campus climate, particularly the psychological climate, which consists of attitudes and perceptions, is not a singular reality; rather, individuals experience climate from the standpoint of their social locations within a given institution.

General depictions of the psychological climate at the four campuses suggested that differences prevailed but did not necessarily produce a “hostile environment.” Students found climates that were “accepting to whatever you want to do” and “welcoming because . . . there are a lot of different groups on campus.” On the whole, said one student, “it’s not like there’s really a lot of discrimination or anything.” Another indicated, “it’s okay to be a religious person and attend college, and you won’t feel attacked. You won’t feel threatened. You won’t feel judged. It’s okay.” Faculty and staff observed that “the mood is definitely more open, it’s more inquisitive,” the religious/spiritual climate is “alive and well . . . students have lots of different outlets to pursue,” and “students [seem to] be very open in learning about other cultures and other religions.”

These characterizations seem to suggest a basic openness and laissez-faire approach to religion and spirituality on campus. Nevertheless, as we discussed earlier regarding the seldom-utilized opportunities for inter-worldview engagement, the attitudinal ethos on many of the campuses was somewhat indifferent to religion and spirituality. A campus chaplain revealed that although many students were engaged in interfaith communication, “there’s a whole [slew] of students . . . [who] may care intellectually and then they think it’s important, but then they’ve got all kinds of other important things to do with their lives, and then it doesn’t make the top five.” Echoing this sentiment, a student acknowledged that “doing well” and socializing in college were priorities; college had little connection to the religious and spiritual part of life: “we all want to do well in school. We all have great social lives . . . So I don’t see that it’s influencing what we, you know, practice on Sundays.” That said, the seeming indifference of some students may have been merely a surface symptom of deeper fears that students—and perhaps some faculty and staff—shouldered regarding the risks they faced in being open:

The talk of religion is taboo and stuff like that. And you’ve got to be careful because they are going to laugh at you. You’ve got to be careful of who is going to get angry. You’ve got to be careful if, gosh, this person is going to tell me that I am going to go to hell because [of] what I am.

There's just never been a time when I'm like, "Hey, let's talk about what you believe in," because it's kind of an awkward subject.

The tendency to conceal religious identities or worldviews was apparent among students and faculty/staff alike when they anticipated a difference:

And so I'm aware of the fact that he is very much involved with his religion, just from casual conversation, from hearing him talk about doing some work with his . . . church, that kind of stuff. And so I've kind of purposefully not gone that route with him as far as my beliefs, because he's a professor and I don't want to piss him off.

Students and I might talk about it if the student brought it up. But I don't typically bring that up with students because I feel like I want them to always feel comfortable to talk with me . . . Students that have really strong belief systems . . . maybe they [would] get turned off by my belief system.

Evidence of conflict in various forms was also apparent. On one campus, controversial preachers evangelized in public spaces on campus, creating considerable discomfort: "This guy was yelling at everybody and people were getting upset. . . I really don't like it when people are yelling at people and telling them that they're going to hell and stuff." Proselytizing, according to a faculty member, "is an incredibly negative element" of campus climate. Another faculty member expressed concern that religious minority students would not be able to thrive in an environment with forceful proselytizing:

It is clearly more difficult for the students who are the "other" to find the places to fit in and to maintain their feeling of safety and security—and availability to be able to grow—when they are often confronted by students who are going to either try to evangelize them or get them to understand that whatever it is that they are doing is against God.

Religious and spiritual conflict came in other forms as well. For instance, on campuses with a religious heritage that had changed or was in the process of changing, making sense of disparate historical and contemporary patterns was sometimes challenging:

It's essentially a secular place that happens to have a beautiful chapel that's really vibrant and a religious life community that's very vibrant in its midst. And so it's a secular place that is open to, at least in spirit, the life of the sacred in its midst. But figuring out how that works can be very hard.

Another noted the potential for religious/spiritual conflict between students and faculty/staff as a reflection of their different political inclinations: "I think you would find the political leanings of faculty and staff to be more to the middle and left, and students would be more to the middle and right."

Experiences of extreme prejudice and discrimination on the basis of worldview were rare occurrences, confirming the general descriptors that participants provided regarding non-hostile climates at their institutions. A faculty member observed,

So even in '03-'04, you would occasionally see a kind of nasty, anti-Muslim smear sign or something like that. You don't really see that stuff anymore . . . I know that my non-

Protestant students don't feel as embattled. . . . They don't feel like they're in the crosshairs anymore. And some of them very much did.

Even so, students alluded to disquieting signs of prejudice that were more benign in nature, but troubling nevertheless. Students adhering to specific religious disciplines were sometimes met with disdain on the part of other students who did not understand their practices:

the majority of people go out and party and get drunk on weekends, and if you are practicing religious principles then that's not okay. . . . some people think you are . . . pretentious in the way you conduct yourself.

Atheist or agnostic students were at times hesitant to draw attention to their worldviews, because "if you say that you're an atheist, it's almost like you have a stigma on you by the people who are Christian in the class. So personally, I just try to avoid the whole issue." A faculty member shared a similar perspective based on his observations in the classroom:

But anybody who identifies as atheist or agnostic, I think people—students—tend to kind of tilt their head to the side and wonder why. But not one of those students in a religion conversation actually ever acknowledged out loud that they were atheist or agnostic. They just said it in a private journal that only I read They wrote it and we were the only ones who knew.

Designing and Administering the Survey

Taken together, these themes resonated with conceptual frameworks derived from the literature in the way that they attest to the multi-dimensionality of campus climates. Building on these and our findings from the interviews, we designed a questionnaire that addressed the nuanced historical, structural, behavioral, and psychological dimensions of campus climate for religion and spirituality. The Collegiate Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey (CRSCS) included 94 items regarding:

- The meaning of spirituality, religion, spiritual development, and religious development
 - Religious, spiritual, or worldview identity
 - Level of commitment to worldview
 - Perceptions of the campus context (e.g., structural worldview diversity, visibility of religion/spirituality, interreligious conflict, collective attitudes toward religion/spirituality on campus, institutional support of diverse worldview identities, behaviors of campus religious organizations, satisfaction with the spiritual climate)
 - Frequency of insensitive comments directed at a particular religion or worldview by students, faculty, administrators, and others
 - Participation in activities related to religion and spirituality (e.g., programs involving discussions of meaning and purpose, interfaith dialogues, campus religious organizations, student-faculty discussions, community service projects)
 - Classroom experiences (degree to which classes: provide safe spaces for spiritual expression, involve religious/spiritual discussions, challenge assumptions, are taught by faculty who dislike discussing religious/spiritual topics, are taught by faculty who discuss their own worldviews, impact spiritual development)
 - Frequency of religious/spiritual engagements (e.g., utilizing multifaith space on campus; attending religious services on or off campus; feeling challenged to rethink assumptions;
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having impactful discussions about religion/spirituality; feeling mistreated, stereotyped, or pressured)

- Resources for spiritual guidance
- Engagement across worldview differences
- Changes in one's own worldview since coming to college
- Beliefs about one's own worldview and worldviews of others
- Perspectives on the appropriateness of religion and spirituality in higher education
- Student characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, academic major)

Once the survey was developed, we solicited feedback from individuals identified as national leaders for their efforts to study and promote positive climates for religious diversity on campus. We consulted these experts throughout the academic year at all stages of this project.

The CRSCS was piloted as a web-administered instrument at two regionally distinct institutions—a public research university and a private research university—in spring 2009. Via email we invited the entire third-year class at each institution to participate in the survey, and we offered participants an opportunity to take part in a lottery for four awards of \$500. A total of 1,078 students responded to the survey. The sample is diverse in terms of worldview identification, race/ethnicity, and academic major. We are currently in the process of analyzing the data using a combination of factor analytic and regression techniques to identify the psychometric properties of the survey, dimensions of campus climate, differences in perspectives and experiences by demographic group (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, worldview identity), and impact of campus climate on several outcome measures included on the questionnaire. Our intent is to generate a research and assessment tool that campuses can use to examine the nuances of their religious and spiritual climates, as well as the ways in which these qualities shape student outcomes over time.

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