

Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

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Abstract: This literature review synthesizes current empirical evidence on spirituality and religion in higher education to inform institutional practice and policy. First, religion and spirituality are defined. Second, the benefits of spirituality and religion among students in higher education are outlined and the struggles are highlighted. Third, how spirituality and religion are conceptually understood and assessed within a higher education environment is explored. Lastly, applications are presented, accompanied by recommendations for institutions and pragmatic suggestions for chaplains. This article is intended to be useful to novices in the field to help them explore their institutional role, or to share with others in the university who are unfamiliar with how integrated Spiritual and Religious Life can be to the mission of their institution.

Keywords: Dimensions of wellness, spiritual, religious, university, college, human flourishing

This literature review synthesizes current empirical evidence on spirituality and religion in higher education to inform institutional practice and policy. First, religion and spirituality are defined. Second, the benefits of spirituality and religion among students in higher education are outlined and the struggles some students' experiences are highlighted. Third, how spirituality and religion are conceptually understood and assessed within a higher education environment is explored. Lastly, applications in higher education are presented, accompanied by recommendations and pragmatic suggestions. This article is intended to be useful to novices in the field to help them explore their institutional role, or to share with others in the university who are unfamiliar with how integrated Spiritual and Religious Life can be to the mission of their institution.

Understanding Spirituality and Religion

Scholars distinguish between spirituality and religion, while acknowledging their conceptual overlap. In a systematic review of the literature, Obregon and colleagues used this distinction:

Religiosity affects how the person believes and follows a particular religion, being based on the beliefs and practices of the same...Meanwhile, spirituality is the individual pursuit to understand fundamental questions of life, such as the

direction, the meaning and the end of it and the relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may or may not derive from religious belief.¹

There are certainly other ways to distinguish between religion and spirituality, but for the purpose of this article, it is only necessary to accept that the definitions of religion and spirituality are not the same, but they do overlap. Note that the terms religiosity or religiousness are used when researchers look beyond religious affiliation to the regularity of one's religious practice and the personal importance of one's beliefs. Religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive, nor do they always go together. People can identify as religious, spiritual, or as both spiritual and religious. Especially in the developmentally transitional time of college,² students' practices and beliefs can change, as can the importance they place on their spiritual or religious life. One of the many developmental tasks of late adolescence is spiritual individuation,³ defined as "the search for the sacred, emphasizing lived spiritual and existential experiences, and the formation of personal beliefs; sometimes associated with a disconnection from previously held family and moral values, religious affiliation, and spiritual beliefs."⁴ As evidence of the many benefits of spirituality and religion among college students has grown, attention to spirituality and religion on campus has increased since the late 1900s.⁵

Benefits

Spirituality and religion can be seen as a part of students' holistic developmental needs⁶ that engenders many prosocial developmental outcomes including ethics of care, charitable involvement, compassionate self-concept, a social justice orientation, personal growth, and lower levels of smoking, drinking, and drug abuse.⁷ Benefits of students' individual practice of

¹ S.L. Obregon et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality and Work: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Directions," *Journal of Business Ethics* 179 (2022): 574.

² E.P. Backes and R.J. Bonnie, eds., *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (National Academies Press, 2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545476/>.

³ S.C. Scalora et al., "A campus-based spiritual-mind-body-prevention intervention against symptoms of depression and trauma; an open trial of Awakened Awareness," *Mental Health and Prevention* 25 (2022): 1-11; A. Tyagi, "Individuation: The Jungian process of spiritual growth," in *Explorations of human spirituality* (Global Vision Publishing House, 2008), 128-153.

⁴ E.J. Mistur et al., "Inner Peace in a Global Crisis: A Case Study of Supported Spiritual Individuation in Acute Onset Phase of COVID-19," *Emerging Adulthood* 10, no. 6 (2022): 1544.

⁵ M.D. Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education," *Journal of College and Character* 17, no. 3 (2016): 147-156.

⁶ Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

⁷ Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education."

spirituality or religion include higher levels of ethics and productivity,⁸ lower levels of anxiety,⁹ as well as prevention against stress, anxiety and depression among healthy, mostly college-age adults.¹⁰ Pearce et al. captured many of the benefits of religion in college students when they wrote:

More frequent religious service participation, regular prayer, and high importance attached to one's religious identity have all been linked to, on average, lower delinquency; less drinking, smoking, and drug abuse; later initiation of sexual activity; better mental and physical health; higher grades and educational attainment; and greater civic involvement.¹¹

Spirituality also benefits students and is associated with reduced stress, anxiety and depression¹² -- higher levels of self-reported spirituality were associated with lower levels psychological distress for students. Even college students with otherwise poor mindsets can benefit from spirituality. A study comparing mindsets among Chinese university students found that if students held failure mindsets, those with spiritual coping techniques and a sense of meaning in their lives were less likely to suffer from suicidal ideation than those who did not have a spiritual coping techniques or a sense of meaning in their lives.¹³ Similarly, students who placed a high level of importance on spirituality/religion and reported having life satisfaction and life meaning were less likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injury than others.¹⁴ Overall, the benefits of spiritual and religious affiliations and practices benefit college students greatly. Despite these numerous benefits, spiritual and religious life is not uniformly positive for all students.

⁸ Obregon et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality and Work."

⁹ A.D. Cherniak, S. Pirutinski, and D.H. Rosmarin, "Does gender moderate effects of religion on anxiety among Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews?," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 24, no. 10 (2021): 1089-1100.

¹⁰ C.C. Borges et al., "Association between spirituality/religiousness and quality of life among healthy adults: a systematic review," *Health Quality of Life Outcomes* 19, no. 246 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-021-01878-7>.

¹¹ L.D. Pearce, J.E. Uecker, and M.L. Denton, "Religion and Adolescent Outcomes: How and Under What Conditions Religion Matters," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 202.

¹² C.H. Leung and H.K. Pong, "Cross-sectional study of the relationship between the spiritual wellbeing and psychological health among university Students," *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249702>.

¹³ J. Guo et al., "A serial mediation model of failure mindset and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students: The impact of meaning in life and spiritual coping," *Acta Psychologica* 255 (2025): 1-10.

¹⁴ V.E. Kress et al., "Spirituality/religiosity, life satisfaction, and life meaning as protective factors for nonsuicidal self-injury in college students," *Journal of College Counseling* 18, no. 2 (2015): 160-174.

Challenges

When students struggle with their spirituality or religion, it can be very stressful. A meta-analysis of 32 research studies concluded that when people experience religious and spiritual struggles (tensions, conflict, or negative emotions around sacred matters), they faced statistically significant increases in negative psychological adjustment such that their wellbeing diminishes and their distress grows.¹⁵ Although this struggle is very personal and unlikely ever to be easy to navigate, on-campus spiritual and other support can, at the very least, help students feel less alone. Ideally students can come to see their struggles as part of their overall development¹⁶ and a chaplain or another person in a Spiritual and Religious Life role may be able to assist in that process.

Conceptual Understanding of Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

How the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life and the entire institution view the roles of spirituality and religion both in students' personal lives and throughout campus is important. College and university students' spirituality and religious beliefs and practices interact with campus life as a domain of wellness¹⁷ as well as a potential contributor to human flourishing.¹⁸ Chaplains and others working in Spiritual and Religious Life capacities can inform others of their important role in the university as a whole.

Human Flourishing Framework

The Human Flourishing movement casts a wide net, encompassing all skills and "qualities that support psychological and social wellbeing."¹⁹ Human flourishing education involves "contemplative skills and perspectives related to conscious awareness, interconnection, and sense of purpose that lead to a life of meaning and service,"²⁰ which aligns with others' definitions of spirituality, and is partially explained by the authors who describe their curriculum as contemplative education.

¹⁵ M.F. Bockrath et al., "Religious and spiritual struggles and their links to psychological adjustment: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (2022): 283-299.

¹⁶ Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

¹⁷ M. Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity of the Wellness Inventory," *Psychiatric Services* 76, no. 3 (2024); P. Swarbrick and J. Yudoff, *Wellness in 8 Dimensions* (Freehold, NJ: Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, Inc., 2015).

¹⁸ B.A. Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation of a college course on human flourishing improve student flourishing during COVID-19? A multi-university study," *Journal of American College Health* 73, no. 4 (2025): 1837-1846.

¹⁹ Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation," 1838.

²⁰ Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation," 1837.

Human flourishing is often measured using an 8-item assessment, which has recently been found to be a trait (rather than state) measurement, meaning it tends to be stable over time.²¹ In psychological assessment terminology, "traits" are stable and therefore resistant to change, whereas "states" are more malleable and open to change in response to changes in behavior or attitudes. Although students' scores on the Flourishing Scale could reflect participation in a supportive community such as a spiritual or religious organization, its stability over time means that college students who participate in spiritual or religious activities on campus and score high on the Flourishing Scale likely started out with high scores and have maintained those high scores throughout their entire undergraduate experience.

Dimensions of Wellness Approach

Since it has been shown empirically that Human Flourishing is a stable trait, the Dimensions of Wellness construct may show more promise to conceptualize and assess the benefits of higher education students' participation in spiritual or religious activities on campus because it promises to be more responsive to changes in students' behavior and attitudes. The Eight Dimensions of Wellness are: Physical, Mental/Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Intellectual, Environmental, Occupational, and Financial.²² This conceptual framework has developmental underpinnings. Each dimension of wellness is an area in which every person ideally experiences development during the late adolescent years, which are ages 18 to 24.²³ Combining a developmental perspective with the Dimensions of Wellness construct draws together two ways of looking at college students: developmentally (over time) and dimensionally (across many areas of life) for a more holistic conceptualization.

Assessment Considerations

It is recommended that institutions employ a conceptualization and assessment that can be responsive to changes in students' experiences, behavior, and attitudes. An early Eight Dimensions of Wellness self-assessment²⁴ consisted of a 10-item Spiritual Wellness checklist:

1. I can name my own personal values and describe my beliefs about life.
2. I make conscious choices about my daily actions based on my personal values.
3. When I get depressed or frustrated, I draw on my beliefs and values to give me direction.
4. I use prayer, meditation, and/or quiet personal reflection regularly in my life.
5. Life is meaningful for me, and I feel a purpose in life.

²¹ B.A. Varga et al., "How Long do We Flourish? A Flourishing State or Trait? A Longitudinal Examination of the Diener Flourishing Scale," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 26, no. 87 (2025): 1-27.

²² M.H. Mayol, B.M. Scott, and J.B. Schreiber, "Validation and Use of the Multidimensional Wellness Inventory in Collegiate Student-Athletes and First-Generation Students," *American Journal of Health Education* 48, no. 5 (2017): 338-350; Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity."

²³ Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

²⁴ Swarbrick and Yudoff, *Wellness in 8 Dimensions*, 10.

6. I try to learn about others' beliefs and values, especially those that are different from my own.
7. I have a strong sense of optimism and faith in the future.
8. I use my thoughts and attitudes in life-affirming ways.
9. I appreciate the natural forces that exist in the universe.
10. I feel gratitude for the good things in my life.

Swarbrick et al. validated a shortened version of their Wellness Inventory, wherein Spiritual Wellness is now collapsed into four items, scored on a 4-point Likert scale of Always, Sometimes, Rarely, or Never:²⁵

1. I reflect on my own personal values and beliefs
2. I use quiet personal reflection regularly
3. I reflect quietly each day
4. I feel a sense of purpose each day

Another similar approach to the same Eight Dimension of Wellness defined spiritual wellness as "One's awareness and engagement in communication, attitude, civility, personal relationships, and contributions made to one's surroundings, community, and society" and provided this sample item for spiritual wellness, "I work to continually explore and expand my personal beliefs, values, and priorities."²⁶ Both Eight Dimensions of Wellness assessments support a conceptualization of spirituality and religion that can be integrated into other wellness efforts across campus and can have the potential to show changes over time in response to students' engagement in spiritual and religious activities on campus.

Institutional Applications

Institutions of higher education have many opportunities to provide mental health prevention and early intervention for students, who are suffering with greater mental health challenges now than ever before.²⁷ Using the Eight Dimension of Wellness construct, these opportunities fit into the Spiritual Wellness category and extend well beyond them. Late adolescence is a key developmental time for students,²⁸ which higher education professionals and institutions already actively support.

²⁵ Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity," 267.

²⁶ Mayol, Scott, and Schreiber, "Validation and Use," 342-343.

²⁷ A. Duffy, "University student mental health: An important window of opportunity for prevention and early intervention," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 68, no. 7 (2023): 495-498.

²⁸ Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*; Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education."

Examples of Programming in Spirituality

How higher education professionals and institutions choose to respond to students' spiritual and religious needs varies by context, but there are models to follow. For instance, first year university students who were given free access to a mindfulness meditation app showed improvement in distress and college adjustment compared to controls.²⁹ Similarly, college students who enrolled in a one-credit mindfulness class experienced lower stress levels and a higher quality of life by the end of the course compared to controls who did not take the course.³⁰ A more comprehensive spiritual-mind-body prevention intervention yielded benefits to participating students in the areas of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.³¹ Authors argued in favor of targeted spiritual-mind-body programs to nurture the developmental task of spiritual individuation within the college environment. Multiple approaches exist for institutions of higher education to offer spiritual support to students at the individual and group levels.

Recommendations

Below are five recommendations for institutions of higher education based on the above literature review:

1. Decide on a conceptual framework for how students' spirituality and religion fit into campus life.
2. Choose assessments aligned with the conceptual framework.
3. Remember that even though students' mental health needs are growing, spirituality and religion can aid them greatly in a multitude of ways.
4. Also remember that some students will be struggling with their previously held spiritual or religious practices and beliefs, and they might need extra support.
5. Utilize religious and non-religious chaplains.

Chaplains

University chaplains can contribute to and support of students' spiritual and religious development. Spiritual care can be effectively delivered by religious and non-religious chaplains. Non-religious (sometimes referred to as interfaith) chaplains are well-positioned to provide neutrality around religion and focus more on students' spiritual development by meeting students

²⁹ J.A.M. Flett et al., "App-based mindfulness meditation for psychological distress and adjustment to college in incoming university students: a pragmatic, randomised, waitlist-controlled trial," *Psychology and Health* 35, no. 9 (2020): 1049-1074.

³⁰ M.W. St. Martin, Z. Vidic, and R. Oxhandler, "Exploring the impact of a mindfulness meditation class on college student stress levels and quality of life," *Journal of American College Health* 72, no. 8 (2024): 2829-2835.

³¹ Scalora et al., "A campus-based spiritual-mind-body-prevention intervention."

where they are and not trying to fix them.³² Regardless of chaplaincy designation, they can help in a variety of situations, including suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.³³ Chaplains are resources in higher education who can help students directly in addition to contributing to a larger university plan to meet students' spiritual and religious needs within a developmental framework of overall wellness. Based on the literature review above, below are ten areas with practical suggestions for chaplains or others in Spiritual and Religious Life to consider implementing to enhance students' spirituality and support their holistic development within the higher education context.

1. Prioritize meeting students where they are spiritually, recognizing that late adolescence is a critical period for spiritual individuation. This means creating non-judgmental spaces where students can explore fundamental questions about life's meaning, direction, and their relationship with the sacred or transcendent—whether or not they identify with a particular religious tradition. Chaplains can facilitate this exploration through one-on-one pastoral conversations that help students articulate their personal values and beliefs without imposing predetermined answers.
2. Establish contemplative practice opportunities that are accessible to students across the spiritual and religious spectrum. This could include offering regular meditation sessions, mindfulness groups, or contemplative prayer circles. Chaplains might coordinate access to meditation apps, facilitate drop-in meditation spaces in campus chapels or interfaith centers, or teach brief mindfulness workshops that help students develop skills for managing stress while deepening their spiritual awareness.
3. Develop targeted support for students experiencing spiritual struggles, recognizing that tensions around sacred matters can significantly impact wellbeing. Chaplains can create structured programs such as small-group discussions where students wrestling with doubt, religious disaffiliation, or conflicts between childhood beliefs and emerging identities can process these challenges communally. Individual spiritual direction sessions can also help students reframe their struggles as part of healthy development rather than as failures.
4. Integrate spiritual wellness into broader campus wellness initiatives by partnering with counseling centers, health services, and student life offices. Chaplains can advocate for the inclusion of spiritual wellness in campus-wide wellness assessments and programming, helping the institution adopt frameworks like the Eight Dimensions of Wellness. This might involve co-facilitating workshops that connect spiritual practices

³² A. Lawton, A. Anderson, and W. Cadge, "Nonreligious chaplains and spiritual care," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023): 1166.

³³ S.M. Saliba, "The contributions of university chaplains, as spiritual care professionals, to suicide prevention: results from a European expert panel," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 27, no. 2 (2025): 222-249.

with mental health, co-presenting at orientation about holistic student development, or serving on wellness committees to ensure spiritual dimensions are not overlooked.

5. Create structured opportunities for values clarification and meaning-making. Chaplains can lead workshops or retreats focused on helping students identify their core values, reflect on life purpose, and connect daily actions to deeper beliefs. This could include facilitated journaling exercises, values-sorting activities, or service-learning experiences with built-in reflection components that help students explore how their actions align with their evolving spiritual commitments.
6. Build interfaith literacy and dialogue programs that help students learn about diverse spiritual and religious traditions. Students are hungry to learn about beliefs different from their own and this education can reduce religious tension on campus. Chaplains might organize interfaith panel discussions, coordinate visits to different houses of worship, facilitate scriptural reasoning groups, or create shared sacred meals where students from various traditions gather to explore common spiritual themes.
7. Establish rituals and practices that mark important transitions in students' lives. Chaplains can develop blessing ceremonies for students facing major decisions, grief rituals for those experiencing loss, gratitude practices during times of celebration, or end-of-semester reflection services. These practices help students develop spiritual resources they can draw upon during difficult times and cultivate habits of recognizing the sacred in everyday life.
8. Offer mind-body-spirit interventions that address the interconnection between spiritual wellbeing and mental health. Chaplains could develop multi-week courses combining contemplative practices, body awareness, and spiritual reflection to help students build resilience against depression, anxiety, and trauma. These programs should be designed with attention to spiritual individuation, supporting students as they form personal beliefs.
9. Provide training and resources for the broader campus community on supporting students' spiritual development. Chaplains can educate resident advisors, academic advisors, and faculty about recognizing when students might benefit from spiritual support and how to make appropriate referrals. They can also develop accessible resources—prayer spaces, reflection guides, lists of spiritual practices—that students can engage with independently.
10. Contribute expertise to suicide prevention and crisis response efforts, recognizing chaplains' unique role in addressing existential distress. This includes serving on campus crisis teams, providing postvention support after campus tragedies, and helping students find meaning and hope during profound difficulties. Chaplains' training in holding space for ultimate questions positions them to offer distinctive support that complements clinical mental health services.

By implementing these practices that grow out of the review of relevant literature above, chaplains and others in Spiritual and Religious Life can effectively support the spiritual

dimension of students' holistic development while contributing to broader institutional goals of student flourishing, mental health prevention, and the cultivation of meaning, purpose, and ethical engagement in students' lives.

After 17 years as a professor of Child Development and Early Childhood Education, Dr. Catherine Gillespie moved into an administrative role in higher education for 12 years, during which time she became a spiritual director. These experiences led her to desire to combine her two vocations and is now she in her first year as the Director of Spiritual and Religious Life at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT.