

An Interview with Arthur Chickering

Recently, noted author and development theorist, Arthur Chickering, shared with us his reflections on his upcoming book on spirituality and authenticity, the importance of meaning making among today's students, and the future of spirituality in student development theory.

The interview was conducted on the morning of March 11, 2004

What prompted you to write your upcoming book, *Education and Spirituality: Strengthening Authenticity, Purpose, and Meaning*?

The book grew out of an initiative that started back at the Fetzer Institute in the late 1990's. The program officer, Tony Chambers, created a Steering Committee that involved a number of people, including Alexander and Helen Astin. Over the course of 18 months we had three, three-day workshops, for which we invited 30-40 people.

Part of the motive for hosting these workshops was our growing sense that there was an increasing gap between the values and purposes that brought faculty members and student affairs administrators into higher education and the institutional cultures and purposes that characterize our institutions. During the course of the workshops we found that people in a variety of positions in higher education expressed concern about the absence of any real focus on meaning, purpose, authenticity, and spiritual growth in their work.

With every group we encountered some problems with language and terminology. The language of 'spirit', it seems, works for some people, but not so well for others. For example, those coming from a more psychological orientation preferred the language of authenticity and purpose. Despite these variations we found that most participants shared a common concern around issues of spirituality and authenticity – especially as higher education more and more collapses around a market-driven mentality with its emphasis on professional and vocational training.

After these workshops, we decided to test the waters at various professional meetings. Alexander and Helen Astin and I did a session at the American Association for Higher Education on a Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m. – before the conference started. About a 150 people showed up for our presentation, which we entitled "Higher Education and Spirituality." At the start of the presentation, we gave people a little bit of background about why he had organized this session. We seated about 7-8 people around tables in the room and asked them to address these three questions:

- How congruent are the culture and relationships at your institution with the values and purposes that brought you into higher education?
- How congruent are those in your department?
- How congruent are they with the kinds of relationships you have on campus?

Once they started discussing the questions, the energy in the room went through the roof. We had the groups talk for about an hour and then we opened it up for a general conversation. The dominant reaction was one of appreciation. The participants were grateful that we provided them a safe space to talk about these issues. We ended up scheduling a follow-up meeting for that afternoon and about 40 people showed up. We felt this positive response validated our impressions about the importance of spirituality and authenticity.

For most of my career, I've been involved, thought about, and have advocated for institutional changes that support affective and cognitive development among college students. I've also tried to get colleges and universities to pay more attention to integrity, identity, authenticity, purpose, and emotional intelligence. Exploring issues related to spirituality, purpose, and meaning were areas very congruent with my career in student development and higher education.

Our book, *Education and Spirituality: Strengthening Authenticity, Purpose, and Meaning*, which will be published by Jossey-Bass, is a reflection of my work in this area. The book should appear in January 2005.

Why is spirituality important for students today?

The evidence is quite clear that students are concerned with spirituality, purpose, meaning, and authenticity as it relates to their lives. We've been getting that testimony from the people we meet in the contexts that I just mentioned.

John Dalton also did a survey of student service professionals recently and came to similar conclusions. More recently, the Templeton Foundation is supporting a national survey that is being conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The project, run

by Alexander and Helen Astin, did a pilot survey this past fall that proved especially fruitful. It turned up impressive results that showed 70 to 80 percent of students indicating that a spiritual quest and search for meaning is very important to them. This trend was observed across many institutional types.

Do you think students are becoming more spiritual? If so, is that a reaction to something in the environment or do you think it's a phenomenon that has always been there?

I do think that a cycle exists. Back in the 1960's and 70's, students coming to college did not use the language of spirituality, but did demonstrate an interest in meaning and finding a philosophy of life. They were interested in finding their purpose in life and experiencing the good life--and to relate that to something larger than themselves.

During the 1970's and 80's there was a swing back to the narrow, narcissistic, self-interestedness with a heavy emphasis on material wealth. In the last decade or so, students are becoming more aware that having a good job or making a lot of money does not necessarily lend itself to having a satisfying, meaningful, purposeful existence. I think the dynamics that have occurred for the yuppie generation and their parents have led them to realize there is more to life than a good job and having a big house and several cars. I do think that the number of students and their level of interest in spirituality have increased in the past decade.

Can you say a little more about spirituality and its connection with authenticity?

We need to make a clear distinction between being religious and being spiritual. I like to use a definition by an author named Teasdale, who observed that there are many religious people who are spiritual and there are many religious people who are not spiritual; there are also non-religious people that are very spiritual and many non-religious people who are not spiritual. What we mean by spirituality is the kind of assumptions, faith positions, and values that are reflected in daily behavior and the way that we live our life. Authenticity, as it relates to that definition, means that you have a sense of who you are and a solid sense of identity. This means there is a consistency between word and word and deed and deed. And its important to be seen as a real person and not be someone functioning behind a mask.

What role do you see administrators and faculty having in a student's spiritual development?

I think the important roles for administrators are twofold. First, they must provide leadership in articulating the importance of outcomes, if you will, for students that have to do with spiritual growth and clarifying issues of purpose, meaning, and authenticity. It is important to provide leadership in creating an environment that enables students to grapple with those issues.

Second, administrators need to model that kind of behavior, that kind of exploration, that kind of seeking, themselves. They need to be authentic in their relationships with each other and students. They also need to create decision-making processes that deal with governance issues that are constant with those values.

The modeling aspect is equally important for faculty. For faculty, the critical issue is to be real as they encounter students. Also, it's important to provide curricular content and use pedagogical strategies that enable students to deal with these issues. Preferably all the content areas in higher education can be used in ways that raise questions about purpose, meaning, and spiritual growth. Certainly the humanities and social sciences are full of content, so are the natural sciences. Ethical issues are also in all the major professions, including engineering and other hard sciences. The major role for faculty is to use reading and writing assignments that raise these issues for students. They must use pedagogical strategies that involve reflection, active learning, active discussion, service learning, community activities, and experiential learning that confront students with some of these issues.

Student affairs professionals face similar challenges. They must use student activities, programming, resident halls, and other experiences to surface these concerns and legitimize their discussions as well as provide safe spaces to encounter each other and each other's differences. It's important to establish a supportive and risk free environment.

Do you envision a new wave of student development theory that will incorporate aspects of student religiosity and spirituality?

I think yes, but I don't know if I would call it a new wave. I think this dimension of student development will get a lot more attention now and in the future. We have the work of Fowler and Sharon Daloz Park's conceptual frameworks. I think this issue must and will be pursued in more detail. Whatever it will be labeled, the topic of spiritual development will continue to grow as an object for continued inquiry and research. It will become a significant component of student development theory. I think that any conceptual framework that attempts comprehensively to address student development will need to give more recognition to spirituality, authenticity, and meaning.

Dr. Chickering, thank you for speaking with me this morning.

Thank you.

Arthur Chickering is Special Assistant to the President and Visiting Distinguished Professor at the Vermont College campus of The Union Institute and University. He is the author of many publications, including Education and Identity (1969, 1993), Commuting Versus Resident Students: Overcoming Educational Inequities of Living Off Campus (1974), The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society (1981), and Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services from Entry to Departure (1989, with N.K. Schlossberg and A.Q. Lynch) and Getting the Most Out of College, (1995, 2001), with Nancy Schlossberg).