

Walking the Labyrinth: Examining the Intersection of Spirituality and Leadership among Senior Student Affairs Administrators

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Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory was to explore and understand the process by which spirituality influences the leadership practices of senior student affairs administrators. There are a number of studies that describe characteristics of educational leaders who view spirituality as central to their leadership; however, this study sought to understand not only these characteristics, but gain further insight on the *process* by which spirituality informs the leadership practices of senior student affairs administrators. Four research questions guided this study:

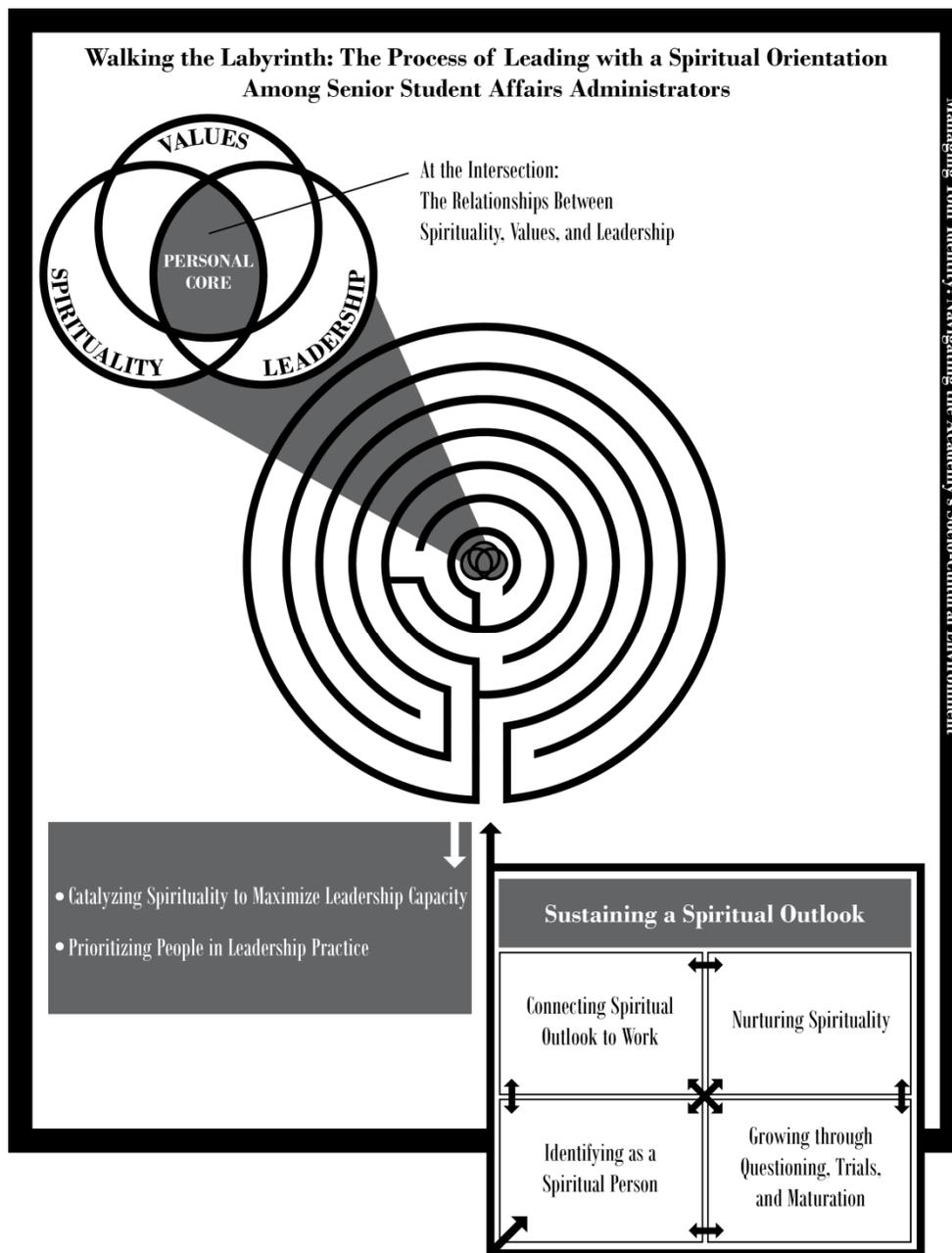
- (1) What can be learned about how spirituality influences the leadership practices of senior student affairs administrators when the intersection of spiritual and leadership development is considered?
- (2) What are the critical influences on the process by which spirituality informs the leadership practices of senior student affairs administrators?
- (3) How, if at all, do the spiritually-guided leadership practices of the senior student affairs administrators in this study influence the organizational environments of their institutions?
- (4) How, if at all, are the spiritually-guided and value-laden leadership practices of the senior student affairs administrators in this study challenged by the socio-cultural environment of the academy pertaining to values, spirituality, and religiosity?

Research Design

I employed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to examine the intersection of spirituality and leadership among senior student affairs administrators (SSAAs). Through the use of sampling criteria and strategies (i.e., a combination of intensity, maximum variation, and theoretical sampling techniques) I sought nominations of SSAAs, currently serving at non-religiously affiliated institutions, who value the influence of spirituality within their leadership. The sampling process yielded 14 SSAAs. I each interviewed each SSAA two times and employed the constant comparative method within the multiple phases of data analysis (i.e., initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding). I recorded memos and reflected with peer debriefers throughout data analysis. Data analysis yielded one core category and four key categories. Three critical influences, two characteristics, and one context for leading with a spiritual orientation were identified within the core and key categories and provide a framework for the emergent theory.

Findings

Categories/Findings and their Corresponding Roles within the Emergent Grounded Theory	
Three Critical Influences on Leading with a Spiritual Orientation	
Core Category	The pervasive and ever-present nature of spirituality is a critical influence on the leadership and leadership practices of the participants.
Leading with a Spiritual Orientation	The personal core, another critical influence, “centers” the leadership process and forms from the relationships between spirituality, values and leadership. Participants described returning to the core to recharge, reconnect with their purpose as SSAAs, make meaning of their experiences as SSAAs and seek congruence among their spirituality, values, and leadership in their leadership practices.
4 Key Categories	
1. Sustaining a Spiritual Outlook	Participants develop(ed) and sustain a spiritual orientation in their lives, a process that emerged as a critical influence on leading with a spiritual orientation.
Two Characteristics of Leading with a Spiritual Orientation	
2. Catalyzing Spirituality to Maximize Leadership Capacity	Participants leverage their spirituality to expand their leadership capacity and refine their leadership practice.
3. Prioritizing People in Leadership Practice	Leadership practices center on regarding people as sacred and the primary priority of leadership.
Context of Leading with a Spiritual Orientation for Senior Student Affairs Administrators	
4. “Managing Your Identity”: Navigating the Academy’s Socio-cultural Environment	Participants are cognizant that higher education is a socio-cultural organization that possesses expressed and unexpressed values, customs and practices creating unique constraints and opportunities for leading with a spiritual orientation and requiring participants to “manage” their spiritual identities in relation to their role as an institutional leader.



Highlighted Implications for...

1. Research/Theory Development: Though a dynamic pertaining to the salience of spirituality was identified within the theory, more exploration would deepen understanding. Does salience of spirituality influence leadership practice? Does salience of spirituality change the manner in which the spiritually-oriented SSAA manages their identity within the socio-cultural environment of higher education?
2. Research/Theory Development: Though the social-cultural environment of the academy and the campus of the SSAA were considered in this study, the socio-cultural environment of the student affairs profession as it pertains to spirituality, faith, and religion was not explicitly addressed. Future research ought to consider how this socio-cultural environment interacts with the dynamics of being a spiritually-oriented SSAA.
3. SSAAs: What types of professional development opportunities exist within student affairs that aid the SSAA in growing in awareness of their inner resources or spirituality? Including conversations about spirituality alongside other identities in SSAA institutes or trainings should be considered.
4. Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs: If master's students are encouraged to speak about their spiritual identity alongside other identities, they can be socialized early on that conversation about spirituality is not less important than other identities.
5. Student Affairs Practice: Spiritually-oriented SSAAs reported opportunities to connect with students for whom spiritual identity is salient. How might the spiritually-oriented leadership practices of the SSAA influence leadership development among students and contribute to an environment where other student affairs practitioners openly engage in religio-spiritual mentoring (Murray & Scott, 2011) of students?