

# **Should Spirituality Related Topics Be Included in the Undergraduate Business Curriculum? An Undergraduate Adult Student Perspective**

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*With this research, we sought to investigate whether spirituality plays a role in inner development in the student lives, ways in which spirituality impacts the student academic and professional lives, and whether spirituality has a role to play in the business curriculum. A total of 208 undergraduate adult students were surveyed. The results indicate that spirituality impacts the student academic and professional lives and spirituality has a role to play in the undergraduate business curriculum.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today spirituality is seen as a critical component of human existence and important in the context of psychological well-being (Johnston & Mayers, 2005; Jacobs, 2012; Moghadam & Rashidi, 2020). Spirituality means different things to different individuals and yet it impacts our ways of knowing in many ways. For instance, some consider spirituality as the cause for their actions while some others consider spirituality to lead to inner connectedness and help makes sense of complex and compelling issues. In the real world, many organizations have started understanding the importance of spirituality and have included the notion of spirituality in how they conduct their businesses. Many researchers have also investigated the importance of spirituality in workplace. Butts (1999) mentions that the idea of spirituality in the workplace is important and identifies dimensions of spirituality such as optimal human development, the art of transcendence and spiritual psychologies. Burack (1999), with the help of different case studies such as Tom's of Maine, Hewlitt Packard, and the Ford Motor Company, highlights the importance of spirituality in workplace as one of the important themes in the development of the organization.

There is also management literature which highlights the importance of spirituality from an organizational performance standpoint. For instance, as pointed out by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002), organizations who help employees or who are willing to provide "individual encouragement" and assist employees in achieving spirituality, gain better performance. Another interpretation would be that the "spiritual employees" lead to better organizational performance. Albuquerque, Cunha, Martins and Sá (2014) found that spirituality was important in enhancing the performance in primary health care services. Management researchers have also linked spirituality with innovative work behavior (Afsar & Rehman, 2015) and job involvement (Van der Walt & Swanepoel, 2015). Furthermore, workplace spirituality was also found to promote a positive, peaceful and a compassionate workplace (Yadav & Maheshwari, 2019).

Despite the importance of spirituality in personal and professional lives, it is very rare to see the inclusion of concepts of spirituality in adult student-oriented management curriculum (Delbecq, 2000, 2005). Many learners serve as leaders and followers at various organizations. Today's workplaces are intercultural, and it is important to be able to help learners understand how values and beliefs impact various

actions at workplace. This is further supported by the longitudinal study by Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Saufos, & Koran (2007) who reported that 49.4% of college students utilized spirituality in their professional lives.

While there have been research studies discussing the inclusion of spirituality related topics in management related classes (Barnett, Krell & Sendry, 2000), not many studies have systematically investigated the undergraduate adult students' views on inclusion of spirituality in management curriculum. There has been a call for more work in this area (Crossman, 2015).

Specifically, with the research we sought to investigate the following:

***RQ 1. Does spirituality play a role in the inner development? If so in what ways?***

***RQ 2. Does spirituality impact the way we do things in our professional and academic lives? If so in what ways?***

***RQ 3. How do the Business, Management and Economics learners foresee the role of spiritual topics in the business curriculum?***

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Notion of Spirituality in Education**

Education should impart the knowledge, skills and values to the student not only from a work perspective but also from the life enhancement perspective (Jacobs, 2012). However, scientific and naturalistic paradigms of the modern era has resulted into more naturalistic education particularly in the West (Jacobs, 2012). There is a great deal of consensus among researchers that spirituality can be achieved within or without the context of religion (Koenig 2004; Saroglou, 2014). If education is approached from a holistic viewpoint the use of spirituality must be encouraged in the curriculum (Prentis, Rogers, Wattis, Jones, & Stephenson, 2014). Spirituality and self-related education encourages students to seek purpose in preparation for moral and ethical challenges at workplace (Karakas, 2011). The inclusion of spirituality related topics in curriculum has known to enhance the key traits such as diversity sensitivity and multicultural competency among students (Williams & Smolak, 2007).

### **Spirituality in Management Education**

Researchers have provided a number of suggestions in regards to utilization of spirituality related topics in a classroom. Various authors have used specific practices such as meditation (Marques, Dhiman & Biberman, 2014; Waddock & Werhane, 2010 ), written exercises which involves student reflecting on how transformational leaders appeal to the self-actualization needs of the followers (Boozler & Madox, 1992), prayer (Schonfeld, Schmid & Boucher-Payne, 2016), project work centering around individual spirituality and creativity (Karakas, 2011), reflection exercises to develop an understanding of individual guiding values and principles (Stonecipher, 2012). Neil (1999) after discussing what workplace spirituality entails also offered resources to faculty in management education who wished to impart education from a spiritual perspective. The author provides a perspective on how edited book resources and case study articles were used to supplement the learning content. Harlos (2000) used anonymous open ended survey to identify what spirituality meant to the students and how important was its role in student lives. Students were also assigned readings, required to listen to presentation and watch video documentaries. In addition, an optional book case analysis was also given for students to use spirituality as a key analytic element linking to aspects such as emotions, organizational process and decision making to name a few.

Bugenhagen (2009) discuss how through various exercises, students were made to explore their values and beliefs and its connection with their carrier. They were also asked to explore how their values and beliefs tied with engaging in social responsibility as business leaders. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) investigated the relationship between spirituality, education and college experience and found that students who engage in spiritual and religious practices are more satisfied with university life and engage more in academic activities. Marcic (2000) recommend specific readings, assignments and activities related to spirituality and

indicate that a survey of different religious and spiritual practices be included in management related courses. Marques et al. (2014) discuss about their experiences teaching an executive MBA course that involved specific readings, and assignments related to workplace spirituality. The course involved two specific activities such as selecting and critiquing an existing business entity and its compliance with workplace spirituality and developing a report that details the main spiritual components of the selected organization. Barnett et al. (2000) offer a conceptual framework for educators to help them in educating students about their own spiritual development. The authors also acknowledge that discussing spirituality in the classroom can be a daunting experience for the students and it is important to be sensitive about this. To make the experience involving spirituality related topics valuable for students, Kernochan, McCormick, & White (2007) indicate that it is important for educators to express their spirituality through actions and not through the declaration of their religious orientations. Pava (2007) stresses the management educators to be precise with their teaching goals, include meaningful and relevant material, to be mindful of what students are saying, to remove any fears students may have and to experiment new ideas.

### **Challenges of Using Spirituality in Management Education**

The notion of spirituality in management education can challenge the comfort zone of students. Also, educators need to be mindful of the fact that the adult learners can be skeptical of faculty members attempts to produce an environment where the self can be explored (Bugenhagen, 2009). Educators must engage students in such a way that they find the topics and discussions related to spirituality motivating rather than debilitating (Lowman, 1999). It is also important for instructors to make sure that students don't see the spirituality related topics as offensive or prescriptive (Klenke, 2003).

It is important for educators to understand that students are not always open to discussions around their own beliefs and values and educators sometimes may need to change their focus away from course content and more towards instructional processes enabling the students to learn more about their individual beliefs (Barnett et al. 2000). Also, as noted by Mick and Fowler (2009), the discussions surrounding spirituality related topics is also related with the faith of the instructor and the comfort level of the instructor in discussing such issues. Various institutional and educational level barriers also impact the integration of spirituality related topics in education (Bingimlas, 2009; Schoepp, 2005). These institutional and educational barriers include time constraints, lack of assessments, organizational and management support, lack of training and knowledge to name a few (Lucchetti, De Oliveira, Koenig, Leite, Lucchetti, 2013; McSherry, 2006)

## **METHODS**

### **Procedure**

After receiving an Institutional Review Board approval, an invitation email with the survey link was sent during middle of the 2017 Spring 1 and 2 terms at ESC to all matriculated undergraduate adult students registered in the Business, Management and Economics program at SUNY, Empire State College. The survey was sent out to a random sample of a total of 1000 students. The surveyed students were enrolled a variety of courses taught in different modalities such as online, face to face, residency-based learning, study group and independent study. This invitation email included the purpose of the study, what we wished to accomplish and the reasons for selecting undergraduate students as potential participants of the study. Also, it was clearly mentioned that student participation is voluntary and that the students could choose to withdraw anytime. It was also indicated that the student non-participation did not have any impact on their ability to complete the activities of the courses they were currently enrolled in.

Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to provide their consent. Prior studies recommend the need to provide an inclusive definition of spirituality given the contentions surrounding the meaning of spirituality (Allen & Williams, 2015; Stewart-Sicking, Deal, & Fox, 2017). Our conceptualization of spirituality was in line with other authors who view spirituality as comprising religious and non-religious frames of reference (Koenig 2004; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). To embrace broad range of spiritualities we utilized the following definition from Johnston and Mayers (2005, pg. 386):

Spirituality can be defined as the search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to a belief in God or some higher power. For those with no conception of supernatural belief, spirituality may relate to the notion of a motivating life force, which involves an integration of the dimensions of mind, body and spirit. This personal belief or faith also shapes an individual's perspective on the world and is expressed in the way that he or she lives life. Therefore, spirituality is experienced through connectedness to God/a higher being; and/or by one's relationships with self, others or nature.'

## **INSTRUMENT**

For the purpose of the research, we utilized the survey questionnaire developed by Allen and Williams (2015). The initial survey instrument comprised of 22 items and three open ended items. The target sample of interest for the research conducted by Allen and Williams (2015) were graduate students. Some examples of items include: "I am actively involved in my spiritual life (alone or in a community)". "I would prefer to engage in spiritual learning and growth outside of my graduate education". The current research focused on adult undergraduate students. Therefore, we modified some of the survey questions to make it relevant for the undergraduate students. Furthermore, the research questions of the existing study required that new questions be added to original instrument. We added 7 new items to the survey questionnaire developed by Allen and Williams (2015). The following are some of the examples of the newly added items: "*I believe spirituality plays an important role in my spiritual development*". "*Spirituality helps me remain focused in times of stress at work*". "*Spirituality helps me overcome negative emotions at work*". "*Spirituality influences the way I work in professional work teams*". We also added questions to capture demographic information such as age, gender and ethnicity. We included the open ended questions developed by Allen and Williams (2015) and given our research question also included an additional open ended questions such as: "In what ways do you think instructors can promote the inclusion of spirituality related topics in management related online classes". Thus overall, the total number of items for the existing research consistent of 32 rating scale items ranging from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly agree). The Cronbach alpa for the instrument was 0.92.

## **QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

The survey received a total of 208 completed responses. A data analysis indicated that majority of survey respondents were over 25 years of age among which 49% were between 25 to 44 years old and 36.9% were between 45 to 64. Approximately 67% of respondents identified as female and 33% as male. Vast majority of respondents (approximately 72%) were Caucasians followed by African American (approximately 9%) and Hispanics (7%).

When asked if spiritual topics should be included as a part of undergraduate management related courses the vast majority of the respondents (approximately 65%) indicated that spiritual topics should be included as a part of undergraduate management related courses whereas approximately 22% disagreed with the idea of the inclusion of spiritual topics and the remaining were undecided. 72% disagreed with the view that discussions of spirituality in a management or leadership class will result in too much tension and negative emotion. When asked if spirituality played an important role in the inner development, vast majority of the respondents (approximately 62%) strongly agreed that spirituality did play an important role in the inner development. When asked how spirituality played an important role in their inner development, some students indicated that "*helps to form my values and beliefs*", "*It helps me to direct my thoughts in a way that empowers me to rise above problems and deal with them constructively rather than destructively*", "*My spirituality energizes and reinforces my spiritual development, as I strive to become a better person. Without my spirituality, I could go to church every Sunday and never hear or learn anything. I consider my spirituality to be the fertile ground from which my spiritual development takes nourishment.*"

When asked if spirituality helped overcome negative emotions at work the vast majority of the respondents (approximately 80%) indicated that spirituality helped them overcome negative emotions at

work. When asked how spirituality helped students overcome negative emotions at work, some students indicated that *"I'm reminded of the bigger picture, not the moment"*, *"Spirituality makes me aware of others feelings which in turn makes me look at both sides of the situation"*, *"Spirituality helps me see the bigger picture and keeps me focused. It reminds of the human side of issues and keeps the quest for the almighty dollar in perspective."*, *"Spirituality allows me to focus on the positives, remain calm, and offers the ability to overcome negativity."* Also, vast majority of respondents (approximately 76%) agreed that spirituality impacted the way they do things academically. When asked how spirituality impacted the way they do things academically, some respondents indicated that *"It makes me more tolerant to diverse views and be accommodative of my classmates and instructor views"*, *"Spirituality helps me concentrate of the goal of finishing my education and keeps me motivated"*, *"It helps me get the most of a course by allowing me to keep an open mind"*.

The highest means with smallest standard deviations are *"Skills for working with people of different spiritualities would be a useful section in a management course"*( $M=3.8780$  and  $SD=1.02410$ ) and *"Spiritual beliefs and practices influence a leader's daily behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, and values"*( $M=3.8454$  and  $SD=1.04152$ ) which may indicate a uniform agreement that there is a great deal of interest to understand spiritual beliefs and practices. In addition, items with the largest standard deviation are *"I consider myself to be a fairly spiritual person"*( $SD= 1.83$ ), *"I am actively involved in my spiritual life(alone or in a community)"*( $SD= 1.92$ ) and *" I would feel uncomfortable or anxious about sharing my views on spirituality in management class"*( $SD= 1.96$ ) indicating less agreement on these questions.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The three open ended questions for the purpose of the study asked respondents to identify the benefits and concerns towards the inclusion of spirituality related topics and ways in which the instructors can promote the inclusion of spirituality related topics in management related online classes. The most frequently perceived benefit of the inclusion of spirituality related topics was the recognition that variety of situations arise in workplace and there is a need to be mindful of influence of spirituality on followers and leaders.

*"Spirituality, while it should likely be a dampened topic in the work place, is one that most likely every leader will have to face given enough time. Knowing how to be sensitive and supportive of varying kinds and degrees of spirituality is most important."*

*"As a manager myself many times the religious aspect is brought in by employees. Those who are not religious struggle with how to deal with employees that maybe are very open about their beliefs."*

*"I think learning about what is important and serious to people of other beliefs could help you be a more diverse and conscientious manager."*

*"Spirituality and religion are at the forefront of many issues in the world today, I believe that learning about others' beliefs will make for a more well rounded leader with better management skills."*

The second most perceived benefit was that inclusion of spirituality will help students broaden their perspectives beyond their individual beliefs.

*"The benefit of including sections on spiritual topics is that it will cause other students to see outside the box of their own beliefs."*

*“Having a broad understanding of others spiritual beliefs would help me as a leader because I would better understand some motivating factors of my staff. Also it would allow me to be sensitive to topics that I might not otherwise find bothersome to others.”*

*“Increased awareness if properly approached and also acceptance of differences in people’s beliefs, an encouraging environment that facilitates open minded discussion that could reduce stress, connect students. Could give access to information beneficial to students entering the industry of business that may have otherwise gone unlearned. A positive experience all around for students and their futures.”*

*“It would be interesting to see what motivates others, even I am not spiritual, I guess it would be helpful to understand coworker’ beliefs.”*

Other perceived benefit categories included that such topics will lead to ethical business practices, enhancing the skills of leaders and helping in building better team working relationships.

*“There is a strong intersection between spirituality/philosophy and philosophy/economics and philosophy/ethics. Economics and ethics are critical to business.”*

*“I think it could play to ethical business practices.”*

*“I think learning about what is important and serious to people of other beliefs could help you be a more diverse and conscientious manager.”*

*“Understanding the members of your team gives the leader insight on how to build better working relationships.”*

The most frequently perceived concerns about the inclusion of spirituality related topic was the potential role of the instructor

*“I would be concerned that the instructor would push his/her views onto the students and would be biased toward their own viewpoint.”*

*“That ideologies and one sided, narrow minded views of professors are not forced upon students as they typically are in all college classes to the detriment of free thinking without fear of failing the class.”*

*“Disrespectful attitudes leading to hurt feelings, strong discussion leaders would be needed - teachers who are not active participants in discussions would not be ideal leaders for those courses.”*

The second most frequently perceived concerns was about the indifference shown students towards spirituality related topics and to people’s belief in general

*“Students can be quite intolerant of others at times and in particular during the online discussion areas.”*

*“Not enough interest, potentially hostile debates depending on approach and class, and possibly stress/anxiety from sharing or hearing others’ spiritual beliefs.”*

The third most perceived concern was the need to make spirituality related topics as elective instead of forcing students to select for them

*“It is one thing to promote being on good terms with all people, another to suggest treating people of different religions differently, and another to invite an instructor, guest speaker, or fellow students to preach their views in class. This is an intensely personal matter, I don't want to hear preaching in my management courses, and I don't want to write a paper on how I apply my spiritual views in the workplace. An elective course on spirituality in the life and role of a manager would be fine with me, for those who are interested. Otherwise, this subject belongs in a John Maxwell "Maximum Impact" seminar (which I have attended and enjoyed), or you can enroll at Liberty University for a more spiritual atmosphere.”*

*“Disrespect or misunderstandings that may occur”*

The fourth most perceived concern was regarding the perception that spirituality may not be an appropriate/relevant topic altogether for business schools

*“Relevance. Spiritual beliefs guide individuals as much as it provides a doctrine for hypocrisy in others. When people decide they want higher education, they want specific skill sets that will help them in the working world. In this case, those skills are business/leadership related, not spiritual.”*

*“Spirituality is intensely personal and should not be part of a college course in a business school.*

*“I think that spirituality is something that we need to respect in each other, but it is basically nobody's business either. I see it as a highly personal subject, like gender issues or politics. I see it as something that could benefit, but not a necessary part of a management course”*

## **DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The results of the survey indicated that while majority of students (approximately 65%) agree that spiritual topics should be included as part of undergraduate management courses, a vast majority were in favor of having them as optional (not compulsory). Also, only 12 % indicated their willingness to drop a course if spiritual topics were a planned part of a management class.

Vast majority of the respondents indicated that they found spirituality to be beneficial to them and helped them immensely in their professional lives. The results indicated that spirituality helped vast majority of respondents to remain focused in times of stress at work, helping in overcoming negative emotions at work, and enhancing ways in which they work in professional work teams. These results support the assertions regarding the importance of spirituality from a professional standpoint. For instance, Spirituality in workplace has been highlighted as important themes in the development of the organization (Burack, 1999). Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) found that employees who are provided encouragement and helped in achieving spirituality lead to increased organizational performance. More recently spirituality has been found to be positively related with emotional well-being and job behaviors of employees (Pawar, 2016; Pradhan & Jena, 2016).

Our study indicated that the majority of students agreed that the spirituality related concepts should be included as a part of undergraduate management related courses. Based on the feedback received it will be important for instructors to have an open mind with regards to the inclusion of spirituality related topics. For instance, one of the participants indicated *“Only that an instructor might try to push their own personal*

*beliefs, rather than sharing them while maintaining objectivity.*” In an online environment, instructors need to be very mindful that students may be apprehensive about sharing their views openly on topics related with spirituality. It becomes important for instructors to use effective facilitation skills in such a context. Particularly in online discussions, where students might find expressing their opinions challenging it becomes important for an instructor to create an environment where opinions on such issues are encouraged and students are allowed to express their opinions freely. It will be important for instructors to empower students to discuss concepts in such a way that such discussions would be useful for students to be all inclusive of the diverse views they may encounter in their work lives. As one respondent summed it up nicely “*Espousing any given spirituality is I think dangerous for a professor. Neutrality should be the goal I think.*”

Also important for faculty will be to be aware of their own spiritual beliefs and understanding the importance of the spiritual beliefs of the students. As one responded duly noted “*The instructor and instilling their belief(Sic); the instructor not having enough accurate information on ALL religions or spiritual topics; the instructor should first be aware of their own spiritual beliefs*”. Developing such awareness for an instructor would be crucial as this will further allow the instructor to understand the challenges associated with this sensitive topic. Increasing faculty member awareness could be done in variety of ways such as consultation or supervision with other experienced faculty members who are knowledgeable about the use of spirituality in management or other educational areas, and attending professional development activities such as spirituality related conferences, workshops and seminar.

It becomes important for the instructors to develop ground rules upfront about what is acceptable and what is not. As one of the respondents indicated “*instructors can promote the inclusion by making it something that is optional to discuss on a personal level, provide ground rules to create a safe environment to discuss, and not push students to learn it in a specific view point.*” It is also important to present spirituality related topics in a way that students are enthused and optimistic about learning such content (Allen & Williams, 2015). Focus should be on development of activities within class that helps students engage in helpful reflection on the world and what they might consider spiritual. As a suggested recommendation, instructors in an online context may include elective group discussion forum which are not mandatory to participate. Furthermore, instructors could also consider providing case studies which promote being all inclusive to diverse perspectives in workplace. Also, the fear of being penalized needs to be removed from student minds about voicing their views in opposition to those of the instructors. The results of the survey also indicated that majority of students would be interested in an assignment where students could choose and attempt spirituality related practices on their own. Administrators must provide faculty with professional development opportunities in this area. Some of the examples would be faculty development workshops, more networking opportunities and forums through which innovative ideas on use of spirituality related topics can be shared. Faculty should be encouraged to open more elective courses in management dealing with spirituality and build upon such experiences. The modality of learning (for instance online vs face to face) was also perceived as important in regards to being open and feeling comfortable regarding spirituality related topics. For example, one of the respondents wrote, “*Being able to talk about my spirituality as I am a shy person. Maybe an online versus a study group would be better for me.*” Comments such as these indicate that the instructors need to be self-aware that learning modalities also play a vital role in acting as crucial medium for students to express their ideas. Spirituality activities may be carefully designed keeping in mind the benefits that modalities offer. Also, faculty need to carefully evaluate “how and where” to best include spirituality in the management curriculum. Along the lines of authors Graff (2007) and Buckley (2012), we recommend faculty to have a spirituality assessment tool to get a sense of student course competencies prior to introduction of spirituality related topics.

## **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND THE AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study was exploratory in nature. This study supports the idea that there is merit in inclusion of topics related to spirituality in management related curriculum. Furthermore, the study also supports the



literature that spirituality is a relevant topic of interest for global leaders and managers. In addition, spirituality also influenced the professional and academic lives of students. Students also highlighted the need for the instructors to be supportive to student beliefs while introducing the spirituality related concepts in classes and to be free from any individual bias while dealing with spirituality related discussions. It was evident that instructors need to be mindful of the sensitivity of the topic and accommodate spiritually inclined learners as well as learners who may not be so spirituality inclined.

The study has four major limitations. The study involved participants from a single college in the United States, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the response rate was a bit low (about 21%) which is not unusual given that it was sent electronically to the undergraduate students (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The open-ended questions in the survey provided useful qualitative data however more elaboration could not be obtained as is possible through other qualitative techniques. The primary respondents of the study were undergraduate students and it will be interesting to conduct the study with graduate students. It will be interesting to replicate the study in other university settings and different undergraduate and graduate programs to investigate the patterns of student interests and concerns.

Future research could investigate how specifically spirituality related topics in class can help learners deal with negative emotions at work. Also, more research is needed on how faculty could effectively introduce spirituality related topics in class and what measures of spirituality will be useful to management student. Such research will encourage more and more faculty to use these concepts in classrooms.

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