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A Guidebook of Promising Practices: Facilitating College Students' Spiritual Development (Book Review)

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**Jennifer A. Lindholm, Melissa L. Millora, Leslie M. Schwartz, and
Hanna Song Spinosa**

***A Guidebook of Promising Practices:
Facilitating College Students' Spiritual Development***

CreateSpace 2011 pb 124 pp \$3.89

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There has been a reluctant acknowledgment in the past few years that there is more to education than just the objective world. For Western higher education this reluctance is connected with the training many of today's veteran educators have in this worldview. Over the past years there has been a shift toward acknowledging that the inner or spiritual life of a person is worthy of greater consideration within education. However, this consideration is not limited to the formal academic study of religion. It is recognition that the "life of the spirit" has a place in a college student's development.

In 2003 the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, under the direction of Helen and Alexander Astin, initiated a national study of college students' spiritual development. The study, which the Astins and Lindholm review in *Cultivating the Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco, 2011), tried to identify what role spirituality plays in students' lives and how spirituality shapes their college experience. Rather than limiting spiritual development to a formal religious worldview, the authors of *Promising Practices* broadly defined spirituality "as pointing to our inner, subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects" (p. 4).

From their data, Astin, Astin, & Lindholm noted a robust spirituality in the lives of students attending both secular and faith-based institutions. These researchers identified that students entered college with hopes for spiritual growth. Colleges have responded to that desire. In particular, institutions that seek to encourage good citizenship have found it beneficial to engage with student spirituality. Approaches to spirituality help "create a new generation of young adults who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations" (p. v).

As the research progressed, educators asked the researchers "how to facilitate students' spiritual development via campus initiatives" (p. vii). *Promising Practices* is a gathering of those initiatives. The guidebook is directed to those in higher education who desire to strengthen or develop programs tied to "issues of spirituality, meaning and purpose" (p. vii). The bulk of the programs involve encouraging students to reflect on the big questions of life: "Who am I? What is my purpose? What is the meaning of life? What kind of person do I want to become?" (p. 3). These are essentially spiritual questions. Interestingly, even as they anticipated their academic careers, freshmen had "high expectations for their own spiritual development" (p. 14). They wanted to engage with these questions. If this felt need is present at the beginning of students' academic careers, it would seem prudent for institutions to respond. This volume reflects that response. The reader quickly discerns that "spiritual development" of students is a collaborative effort drawing on diverse areas of campus. Cooperation across the disciplines is common, particularly in the hopes of assisting students to "develop more integrated worldviews" (p. 31).

Promising Practices is "not intended to be a complete directory"; it is a "broad survey of practices from a diversity of institutions" (p. 25). The

guidebook is divided into sections intended for the reader to access the information more easily. The authors divide the descriptions into curricular, cocurricular, and campus-wide initiatives. They further divide the information with suggestions and observations relevant to different campus constituents (administrators, faculty, and student leaders). The book is a companion volume to the findings of the ongoing project directed by the Astins and Lindholm (2011).

The extensive lists of initiatives show how reflection is used in classroom settings and elsewhere. Repeatedly the reader encounters how institutions help students address their big questions explicitly and subtly. The examples are not rigid or sectarian; they function as primers for developing student spirituality. It takes a broad approach and seeks to engage with all levels of a campus community. If the volume has a thesis, it is twofold: the spiritual development of students is an important part of higher education, and the ways of providing this added value to their education are diverse.

In listing those who provided institutional information, it appears that most were upper- or cabinet-level administrators. They are well situated to gather a list of academic initiatives. Those whose work leads to involvement with students' spirituality realize that many initiatives focused on spiritual development go unnoticed and exist under the campus radar. The researchers might have found it insightful to speak with these men and women who are often lower-level administrative staff and students, as they have a different insight into these types of programs.

Yet, the noteworthy observation from this book was that the most successful initiatives were campus units working "in collaboration toward a common goal" (p. 77). Simply, this type of joint effort created space for students to grapple and engage with their big questions. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

David M. Johnstone