

Spirituality in Professional Higher Education

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Laszlo Zsolnai¹ , Lisa Miller², Marjorie Woollacott³ and Julio Bermudez⁴

Abstract

There is alarming psychological dysfunction within our universities. Depression, together with anxiety, substance abuse and chronic stress is widespread among students and faculty. Additionally, there is increasing evidence of growing cultural, racial, political and other social-borne friction on and around campuses. Clinical and epidemiological evidence suggests that spirituality could have protective benefits for mental health. But the current functioning of many of our universities discourages introducing spirituality in academic culture, mission and values, not to mention curricular and extracurricular activities. This article investigates the root causes of this situation in different professional fields, namely pedagogy and psychology education, healthcare education, economics and business education and architecture education. Initiatives are presented where opportunities for spiritual approaches and practices are provided in universities. Finally, the vision of an 'Awakened Campus' is discussed which aims to create free and safe spaces for students, faculty and university leaders for spiritual growth and development.

Keywords

Mental health crisis, spirituality, professional higher education, materialist mindset, the Awakened Campus Initiative

The Mental Health Crisis in Our Universities

The rate of death by suicide now rivals the rate of death by auto accident as a foremost killer of late adolescents and emerging adults. Addiction, depression and anxiety, as the *diseases of despair*, are at unprecedented levels, on average twice the level as ten years ago, now with *half* of young adults reporting an intrusive level of suffering (Brignone et al., 2020; CDC, 2019; Liu et al., 2019; NIMH, 2019). The guardian of development in many young adults is academia, which undeniably has failed.

¹ Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

² Spirituality, Mind, Body Institute, Columbia University Teachers College, New York, NY, United States

³ Institute of Neuroscience, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, United States

⁴ School of Architecture and Planning, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, United States

Corresponding author:

Laszlo Zsolnai, Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, 1093 Budapest, Fovamter 8, Hungary.
E-mail: laszlo_zsolnai@yahoo.com

The elevated rates of diseases of despair go hand in hand with a sharp decline in personal spiritual life and family faith observance. Through the lens of genetic epidemiologic twin studies (which determine the heritable versus environmental contribution of any human capacity), religion is nearly entirely environmentally transmitted and spirituality is a heritable inborn capacity in all human beings that can be cultivated by environment (within a religion or outside of a religion) (Kendler et al., 1997, 1999).

More specifically, we suggest to understand spirituality as

[A] deeply seated awareness, worldview, attitude and/or way to perceive/act in the world that emerges from, responds to and/or expresses (a) a realm, order, or being beyond the limits, understanding, and control of individual and socio-cultural consciousness; (b) fundamental connectedness with others, nature, and/or divinity; and/or (c) serving or helping other living beings (Bermudez, 2023, p. 14).

Spirituality offers the ‘big picture’ about our lives, society, the world and beyond. It gives us a holistic, transcendental and empathic understanding and attitude. Put differently, spirituality directs people to matters of significance, purpose, goodness, truth, beauty and justice. And by definition and experience, spirituality cannot be egocentric, ethnocentric or even anthropocentric. Instead, spirituality engages the fullness of being. Whereas religion involves institutionalizing a social organization promoting a *particular way* to believe, explain, exercise and transmit spiritual meaning, information and experiences, spirituality is defined by a more encompassing attitude, openness and sensibility. Such an awareness may be considered the common ground upon which all faiths build their foundations. For this reason and the incredibly diverse nature of today’s societies, spirituality appears as the right approach and practice to enable people to engage one another at the deepest levels.

Current Western academic culture has largely eliminated public discussion of both spirituality and religion, and has yet to become conversant on the science illuminating the distinction and confluence of the two. Forty years ago, with a likely positive intention to be inclusive of religious diversity, much of Western culture removed the expression of religion from the public square including the classroom, businesses, government and community or civic life. The approach generally was predicated on an assumption that inclusivity meant creating a blanket non-religious civic life. The outcome, however, was not greater inclusivity, but rather radical exclusivity of the vibrant voice of religious pluralism and diversity, as well as the silencing and in time foreclosing of the deeper spiritual nature of human beings.

A rising generation of young adults has not been supported in spiritual growth nor questing for transcendent meaning and direction. The innate spiritual core in many young adults has been left to atrophy. In brief, the eradication of spiritual life from the public square appears to have rendered a generation of young adults fragile and suffering with inner pain.

Now the current pandemic of the diseases of despair across youth culture poses impetus to reassess this approach. Society now is more ready for this possibility based upon our growth of the past decades. We have grown to embrace diversity and inclusivity around race, gender, sexual orientation and neurodiversity, based upon expression of difference not by silencing the conversation of pluralism. As a next horizon, the time is now to explore inclusivity around the expression of spiritual diversity, which includes an extraordinarily broad range of the world faith traditions and wisdom traditions, as well as the experiences of people who are spiritual but not religious and agnostics, atheists and humanists.

There is a solution to this crisis: an empirical road map for intervention and hope. Epidemiology reveals in longitudinal twin studies that adolescence marks a hard-wired window of intensive spiritual growth and development, extremely sensitive to impact of environment, primarily through spiritual sharing in relationships with adults, peers and the broader culture (Button et al., 2011; Koenig et al., 2008; Miller, 2015). In this window of growth potential is the college setting, with mentors, faculty, counselors and clergy, who could support and nurture the natural emergence of spiritual individuation. In light

of the data, this may be the most important work engaged at the university for long-term health wellness and relational ethics.

The target of spiritual growth can be addressed through the language of science, lived experience and religious or cultural pluralism.

Every single human being is born with the neural capacity for spiritual life. Neuroimaging studies have found common neural correlates across people of diverse religious traditions as well as among people who are spiritual but not religious (McClintock et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2014, 2018; Newberg, 2018). Our common seat of spiritual awareness, our 'Awakened Brain', includes circuits that support the perception of the deeper nature of life; namely, a common experience of relational transcendent awareness revealing that we are loved and held (bonding network), guided (a shift from dorsal to ventral attention) and never alone (parietal region). The more that we engage our Awakened Brain in reflection, meditation, prayer and openness to nature or altruism, the more that we practice and strengthen these pathways and may even thicken the cortex across these regions, the more we offer neuro-protection against subsequent episodes of the diseases of despair.

Often only within the context of addiction recovery 12-step programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous do young adults encounter guidance or even license to 'hand it over to higher power' and the unconditional acceptance and love of relational spirituality. Why do we wait for young adults to suffer, when it is their birthright to engage relational spirituality?

Integrating spirituality in business and management is a well-know phenomenon (Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2011; Chatterji & Zsolnai, 2016; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Pruzan & Pruzan, 2007). We could refer to cases of business and social enterprises which build their working models and functioning on spiritual bases. The founders/leaders of these organizations are individuals whose professional practices and achievements are inspired by spirituality.

Famous spiritual-based business and social organizations include the Mondragon cooperatives in Spain (founded by Catholic priest, José María Arizmendiarieta), the Focolare enterprises worldwide (initiated by Chiara Lubich, member of the Franciscan Third Order), Organic India (founded by Bharat Mitra, a devotee of Hindu spirituality), Arawind Eye Care System (initiated by Dr. G. Venkataswamy who was inspired by Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo), California-based Patagonia, Inc. (established by Zen Buddhist practitioner, Yvon Chouinard) and Belgian social enterprise Apopo (co-founded by Zen Buddhist monk, Bart Weetjens) (Kovacs & Zsolnai, 2025; Zsolnai, 2022).

Call for Spirituality in Higher Education: Literature Review

The need to bring or include spirituality in higher education is not new. We can certainly find plenty of literature and discussion on the topic in the United States starting in the late 1990s through the early 2010s (Esbjorn-Hargens et al., 2010; Kronman, 2006; Lewis, 2007; Miller, 2000, 2005; Palmer et al., 2010). This work was done by education critics, scholars and practitioners and offered excellent philosophical, cultural, curricular, pedagogic and psychological arguments for the inclusion of spirituality in higher education.

One particular work appears to shine over all the rest, and this was the multi-year empirical study of 112,232 first-year students as they entered 236 U.S. colleges and universities (and 15,000 of these were polled again in their junior year) and 40,670 faculty at 421 colleges and universities nationwide led by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) professor Alexander W. Astin and supported by the Templeton Foundation (Astin et al., 2011). The data coming from this study show conclusive evidence that there are not only great, multidimensional educational advantages of having spirituality in the curriculum but also that many of the fears and misconceptions surrounding such adoption were misleading.

The results of the study by Astin et al. (2011) can be summarized as follows.

- Spiritual quality significantly increased while religious engagement and religious/social conservatism tended to decline.
- Greatest spiritual growth was correlated to engagement of ‘inner work’ (i.e., self-reflection, meditation, contemplation). The latter two improved religious commitment and engagement.
- Faculty rarely invited students to explore spiritual or religious issues. When professors encourage questions of meaning, spiritual growth is involved. Faculty asking students to engage in religious matters increases both students’ religious engagement and commitment AND religious struggle.
- Direct experience of diversity (people, culture, beliefs etc.) through international programmes, interracial interaction, interdisciplinary work, service learning and other types of civic engagement encourages spiritual growth.
- Spiritual growth correlates with students’ academic performance and individual development. This is also true with religious qualities.
- Work on the ‘inner self’ assists in improvement in academic and leadership skills, supports psychological well-being and boosts students’ college experience.

However, the scholarship on spirituality in higher education stopped around 2012–2013. We can hardly hear any voices in this area since then. The reason for such silence could be found by concerns that many consider much more urgent such as, on the liberal or left side of the political spectrum, social justice, inclusivity, equity, racial and gender biases, global warming and climate change etc. On the ideological right, we have witnessed the politicization of the curriculum and campuses, cultural war, de-funding of public education etc. It is obvious that the cost of (and thus accessibility to) higher education has loomed large, trumping many if not all the other concerns, paradoxically pushing universities to the more pragmatic and historic cognicentric (i.e., training centred) model of higher education that has traditionally avoided all connection to spirituality.

Instead of being aloof, spirituality actually addresses the most important challenges of our time as it goes to the very root of the problem facing us. For example, the big disparities, struggles and destruction we witness in the world today come down to our lacking a coherent and comprehensive sense of wholeness or unity. An integral, ethical and metaphysical (i.e., transcendental) vision and experience of reality, that is, a spiritual worldview will go to the source of the illnesses and not just deal with its symptoms.

We can understand that the original project of bringing spirituality into the mainstream of educational consideration has carefully addressed the issue in general. However, because of such generality, the movement did fall short of providing guidance or testing its incumbency and relevancy beyond the obvious. This was particularly problematic in professional fields that tend to be the ones where recent graduates most immediately enter the job market and impact the real world. A professional curriculum and pedagogy that manages to educate students for successful professional performance while inculcating fundamental spiritual visions, values and practices would go a long way to advance the inclusion of spirituality in academia.

Higher education poorly addresses the issue of personal (i.e., existential) meaning, cultural chauvinism, socially and ideologically constructed discriminatory practices and worldviews and so on. While all these issues are present in an individual’s mind/heart, they are not just psychological, personal issues but they have a contextual or sociocultural dimension. In other words, our critique should include not only a lack of attention to first-person issues (i.e., psychological, personal, self-centred, the ‘I’) but also to the

second-person dimensions of the human experience (i.e., the ‘we’ or ‘us’) that operate within and without, most of the time without our awareness. Additionally, the inclusion of spirituality must address the third-person dimension of reality (i.e., the empirical, ‘objective,’ measurable, the ‘it’). In other words, like philosopher Ken Wilber (2007) argues, we must have a comprehensive view of reality to begin to properly operate in the world. This is something that the proponents of ‘integral education’ (Esbjorn-Hargens et al., 2010) put forward that is congruent with the inclusion of spirituality in higher education.

What Is the Problem with Our Universities?

Except universities and colleges by religious affiliation, today’s universities function as secular institutions. They are usually devoid of any reflection on spirituality in their curricular activities. Spirituality is considered as a private matter of students and faculty, and there is no place provided for the deeper spiritual-existential questioning in the disciplines and the professions. Some universities, especially in the USA, have established faith centres, but these faith centres are separated from the work of the departments and not meaningfully connected with the education and research activities of the universities.

Today’s secular universities function on the basis of a materialist and reductionist worldview (Galileo Commission, 2019) and cultivate a conception of humanity that can be called ‘Homo Materialis’. This conception of humanity presupposes that people have only material desires, act by extrinsic, mainly money-driven motivations, and are interested in their own material welfare alone (Zsolnai & Flanagan, 2019).

Mainstream disciplines and the professions force students and faculty to focus on the scientific/technical aspects of problems and neglect and even deny the importance of the ecological/systemic, the interpersonal/social and the existential/spiritual aspects (Mitroff, 1998). This self-limitation is not just reducing the real-world applicability of the problem solutions but also blocks the opportunities for deeper questioning and further intellectual and spiritual growth.

We illustrate the spiritual blindness of today’s universities and the shortcomings of that praxis in the field of psychology and teachers’ education, healthcare education, economics and business education and architecture education.

Psychology and Teachers’ Education

In a three-year study of spiritually supportive K-12 schools, it was found that spiritually supportive K-12 schools share core dimensions of pedagogical culture more than subject-based curriculum. Spiritually supportive schools cultivate relational spirituality through culture. For instance, schools often welcome practices that engage relational transcendent awareness, foster a lexicon around the sacred, have hired caring professionals full-time to cultivate spiritual values within the school, and support students in experiencing fellow living beings as being in relationship to humans. Foremost teachers (and teachers in training) are invited to cultivate and nourish their own spiritual awareness. Based upon the findings of this three-year study, the Awakened School Institute was developed, through which K-12 teachers and administrators are trained into a common approach that can translate to any school mission, community or culture.

Beyond the research driven approach of the Awakened School Institute, hundreds of educators convene every two years for the Awakened School Conference at Columbia University Teachers College to share their own discoveries and practices around nourishing the spiritual core in whole child education.

Before a teacher is prepared to support spiritual awareness in her or his classroom, they must always be invited to explore their own spiritual life. Engaging awakened awareness, as a sustained way of being by the teacher, foundationally informs the relational culture of the classroom. University training in K-12 education already has expanded in the past decade to include study of whole child development through positive education, mindfulness and character education. As a natural next step, universities now might offer training to support the spiritual core of the whole child, based upon the science on natural spirituality and its development in youth.

Healthcare Education

University programmes across North America and other parts of the world, approach courses designed to prepare students for careers in medicine and the allied-health professions through a reductionistic materialist perspective, typical of allopathic medicine. This type of preparation is important in giving students the training in medical technology to accurately assess and treat patients. However, today's university pre-medical training is only focused on treating disease within the domains of the anatomy and physiology of the human body. It does not include a focus on mental and spiritual health.

This materialist approach to medical education is in contrast to the recommendations of many studies concerning the importance of spiritual care within the healthcare setting (Chen et al., 2018). Research suggests that spiritual health¹ is one of the most important dimensions of wellness (Kolander & Chandler, 1990). It has also been shown that enhancement of the spiritual health of clinicians not only increases their satisfaction with life but also reduces job burnout and assists them in applying spiritual care to patients (Hu et al., 2019; Orellana-Rios et al., 2018). So, we might ask why university healthcare students are not educated about the importance of these issues.

The following case illustrates the problem. A professor proposed teaching a course in the Human Physiology Department of a major US university on Complementary Medicine, in which she would address topics related to treating the whole individual (mind, body and spirit), rather than just focusing on the physical body. She asked the Department Chair if she could teach this course to undergraduate majors. The response was, 'no'. The Chair said that none of the pre-med majors would want to take this type of course, implying that it would not be rigorous.

The professor strongly disagreed and explained that she wanted to make this a rigorous course in which students would write carefully researched papers exploring the efficacy of different modalities of complementary medicine on all aspects of health. A compromise was reached. The course was offered on a trial basis.

When they put this course on the registration calendar, within the first few days of registration the 30-person capstone class was full, with a waiting list of 20 people. Finally, they expanded the registration numbers to 50. The course became phenomenally successful.

The professor taught the course for 12 years, and always was extremely successful, receiving high marks in its evaluations. However, when she retired from the university, the course was discontinued, as there were no other faculty with interests in the area. Even though the course was a success, it did not have the faculty interest to maintain it within the curriculum.

This emphasizes a key challenge regarding adding holistic medicine coursework into the pre-med curriculum: the need to educate current science faculty and administrators in the value of these courses in educating future healthcare practitioners. Indeed, a reason that university faculty have been hesitant to support courses which embrace the view that the mind and spirituality are considered vital to healthcare is that they may lose credibility with their materialistically-oriented university colleagues.

Economics and Business Education

Today economics and business education is dominated by the neo-liberal paradigm of economics. It is based on unrealistic and limiting assumptions which fail to address the current economic complexities, and the concomitant widespread ecological destruction and the deterioration of human well-being (Snower, 2020). Economics and business education should be freeing itself from the ‘iron cage’ of utility and profit maximization, market equilibrium and the standard economic policy toolbox relying on monetary incentives.

Contrary to some innovative and noble efforts to change economics and business education, economics and business curricula all over the world still promulgate a distorted view of human nature (humans are motivated solely by greed and purely opportunistic), a narrow and outdated notion of ethics (materialistic egoism) and a limited definition of management (management is about making money and can be captured solely in economic terms) (Mitroff, 2004).

Using the neo-liberal ‘economistic’ mindset economics and business schools produce young professionals who have autistic personality traits, think that ‘greed is good’, and follow the ‘enrich yourself’ mentality. Also, mainstream economics and the related business disciplines forces students (and faculty) to solve the wrong problems precisely. Harvard decision theorist Howard Raiffa labelled the error of solving the wrong problem precisely as the ‘Error of the Third Kind’ (Keeney & Raiffa, 1976). Focusing on the scientific-technical aspects of problems and disregarding the other important aspects, economics and business graduates can easily commit the Error of the Third Kind that can worsen the problems to be solved (Mitroff, 1998; Zsolnai, 2020).

Also, mainstream economics and business education promotes a strong materialist value orientation which gives priority to values such as money, possessions, image and status, and de-emphasizes the importance of spiritual values such as interpersonal relationships, love, solidarity, compassion, care and justice. Extensive psychological studies document that the more people prioritize materialist goals, the lower their personal well-being and the more likely they are to engage in manipulative, competitive and ecologically degrading behaviours (Kasser, 2003, 2011).

George Akerlof (2020), a Nobel prize winning economist, advanced the proposition that economics, as a discipline, gives rewards that favour the ‘hard’ and disfavour the ‘soft.’ Such bias leads economic research to ignore important topics and problems that are difficult to approach in a ‘hard’ way, thereby resulting in ‘sins of omission.’ It is true for economics and business education too. There is an urgent need to integrate studying ‘soft’ aspects such as ecology, sustainability, culture, sociology, psychology and spirituality in the curricula of economics and business schools.

Architecture Education

Architectural training has usually focused on external, ‘objective’ knowledge, skills and methods. At first sight, this makes sense in the design studio and technical classes (e.g., structures, environmental control and computer aided design [CAD]). However, upon closer inspection, architecture fundamentally depends on human (social and personal) interaction, exposing the many limitations of the external, ‘objective’ emphasis. A good teacher could bring in the semiotic and phenomenological dimensions of architecture to expand such narrow, object-centred emphasis which, in turn, provides an excellent pedagogic entry to spirituality.

The most censored or ignored dimension in architectural education has been the internal or ‘subjective’ experiences. This statement may appear counter-intuitive as many fault design education as being overly ‘subjective’. However, in truth, it is mostly built upon external, ‘objective’ and the normally

unnoticed but immensely influential social, cultural and professional perspectives. Pedagogic advances here do not imply pursuing the students' egocentric desires but instead making learners participate in the learning process with their full being. Instilling metacognitive abilities should take priority here along with the development of the emotional, embodied, interpersonal and intuitive aspects of the self.

The need and call to bring spirituality into architectural education is not new. Twenty-nine years ago, an influential document circulated in the architectural academy that pointed out the importance of spirituality in the professional education of architects. As it was called, the 'Boyer Report' (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996) counselled architecture schools to incorporate what could be reasonably considered as a 'spiritual perspective' into their mission, curriculum and service. And this document was not the only one. Another one written by the International Union of Architects (UIA, 2002) explicitly recommended architecture schools include spirituality in their professional programmes. Fortunately, however slow, there are promising efforts moving in this direction (e.g., the creation and work of the Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Forum since 2007—ACSF, 2024).

Giving Room for Spirituality in Curricular and Extracurricular Activities

Three main causes of resistance to integrating spirituality into higher education can be identified (Bermudez, 2023., p. 18). The first one is that engaging spirituality risks brainwashing students into irrational thinking and behaviour. The second one is that spirituality can steer away students and faculty from proven, good educational practices, causing poor learning outcomes. Finally, the third one is that spirituality challenges the mandated separation of church and state in public institutions.

This article intends to show that the above fears are not real and spirituality can bring substantial benefits for students and faculty, and has a huge potential to contribute to the development of the disciplines and the professions. Investigating dozens of professions, the Palgrave International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions (Zsolnai & Flanagan, 2019) shows that the professions can gain a lot by employing a spiritual perspective. Spiritually informed social practices can lead to better and more satisfying results than practices exercised on a purely materialistic basis. The inclusion of the spiritual may lead to more ecological, happier and peaceful functioning.

The literature on workplace spirituality reveals that over the past decades an increased focus on spirituality issues has extended into the world of organizations. As individuals experience social anomie, they are looking to their work environments to fulfil needs for belonging, social interaction and feelings of significance.

Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2019) observe that dual factors motivate the development of workplace spirituality. One is focusing on respect for the individual; the other is concerned with the impact of workplace spirituality on an organization's financial success, reputation and public relations. At the individual level there is a recognition that employees have an internal need to engage in a life of meaning and purpose, the belief that the work they do contributes in a positive way to others; such work results in feelings of wholeness and self-worth. At the organizational level workplace spirituality may be correlated with various organizational goals, such as reduction of turnover, absenteeism, negative health outcomes and stress; and an increase in performance and productivity, loyalty and organizational identification and job satisfaction.

Findings suggest that organizations which have a spiritual culture can realize valuable employee benefits. Workplace spirituality has a significant impact on employee motivation, productivity and retention. It has a strong positive effect on employee engagement and reduction of withdrawal behaviours (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2019).

The benefits of workplace spirituality can be realized at the universities too if they give room for spirituality in their curricular and extracurricular activities.

Psychology and Pedagogy

There are two major approaches to the integration of spirituality into psychological treatment and its training in emerging mental health professionals. One is a partnership model between a traditionally trained mental health provider and a clergy member of the client's own religious tradition, which might by analogy be seen as a sort of 'layer cake' model of two distinct professions. An equally common model is a psychotherapist trained in a spiritually integrated models of treatment and assessment, perhaps analogous to a 'swirl cake' in which treatment mixes psychological and spirituality support. Numerous academic and trade books have been written on both forms of spiritually integrated care.

The choice of model for spiritually supportive treatment naturally resides in the hands of the client. In training emerging providers, it is essential that students understand both models, to be prepared to help the client identify a choice to cultivate a spiritual response to suffering or transformation.

University students show a post-pandemic surge of interest in learning about spirituality in psychology as tracked by the relevant division of the American Psychological Association in conference attendance. Resources for faculty interested in building courses on spirituality and psychology are available online from the relevant American Psychological Association (APA) division.

Healthcare

An important question regarding health care education is how we make room for spirituality related courses amidst the urgency perceived by the medical professionals to add more competencies in the hard sciences, as medicine becomes more specialized. And yet, without the foundation of competencies in caring for the whole human being, clinicians are set adrift with their pharmaceutical and surgical tools, without an anchor of how to apply them in a way that truly nurtures the patient they are in relationship with.

Kruizinga et al. (2018) addressed these challenges and possible solutions for a full-fledged integration of spiritual care and medical care. They note that attention to spiritual needs of patients is a task for every healthcare practitioner. And they call for courses on spirituality and spiritual care being mandatory in the medical curriculum, so that all clinicians can be trained.

Though undergraduate pre-medical sciences programmes do not typically address issues related to spirituality in medical care, it is encouraging that medical schools are beginning to bring courses addressing these issues into the curriculum. However, a study of 25 accredited medical schools in German-speaking countries (Taverna et al., 2019) found that none had a mandatory course dedicated to spiritual care, though 14 had elective courses on spiritual care and nine incorporated spiritual care into mandatory courses on other topics.

Similar results were found from a survey of medical schools in the UK (Culatto & Summerton, 2015). Sixty-three per cent of medical schools had an integrated component, while only 6% had a mandatory and dedicated course on spirituality in healthcare. It is also of interest that Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, has recently created their first programme for medical students in clinical spiritual care (Fopka-Kowalczyk et al., 2022). These results are similar to those found in North American countries (McCormick, 2011).

The positive news is that many medical schools are including spirituality in their elective courses. Kruizinga et al. (2018) note that in the United States, more than 100 medical schools have integrated religious and spiritual issues into their curriculum (Lucchetti et al., 2012).

The University of Michigan Medical School (2023) has developed an exemplary programme in Health, Spirituality and Religion with goals (a) to develop spiritual competencies in all of their medical students; (b) to provide opportunity for deeper discussion/education on this topic for interested students and other learners; (c) to raise awareness of the intersection of spirituality, faith and religion with medicine in the health system at large; (d) to ensure that their endeavours are open to all interested faculty, clinicians, nurses, chaplaincy staff and other healthcare professionals; (e) to develop a community of people at the University of Michigan who are passionate about this topic; (f) to provide education on incorporating spirituality into professional and personal development and (g) to improve patient care through these efforts.

In summary, studies emphasize that attention to the spiritual needs of patients is a task for every healthcare practitioner, and that courses on spirituality and spiritual care should be mandatory and fully integrated in medical education. Though across the globe, we are far from reaching these goals, many medical schools have increased their coursework in this area, and though it may only be in elective courses or taught as a part of broader topic areas, it is gaining in priority, in many cases, with sincere efforts by medical staff.

Economics and Business

To tackle the messy, wicked problems of the Anthropocene the curricula of economics and business education should be broadened and refocused. This broader curriculum may include (a) redefining economics as a science of the livelihood of people, (b) capturing the full spectrum of human existence, (c) considering the whole economic system, (d) acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature, (e) promoting frugal production and consumption, (f) making room for ethics in economic coordination mechanisms, (g) reinforcing the intrinsic motivation of people and (h) developing holistic measures of value and well-being (Zsolnai, 2022). By adopting more substantive, humanistic and spiritually informed approaches economics and business education can produce more mature and mentally healthier professionals who are capable to develop solutions that contribute to the flourishing of life on Earth (both human and non-human, present and future).

There are several methods and tools that can be successfully used by economics and business educators to help their students to become enlightened practitioners who serve the greater good of society and nature. These methods and tools include:

1. Experimental teaching (using various experimental games and decision-making exercises)
2. Cross-cultural teaching (always referring to the cultural biases of any given business praxis)
3. Whole systems teaching (exploring the wide range of stakeholders, including nature and future generations)
4. Critical teaching (making explicit the hidden assumptions of problem formulation)
5. Existential teaching (defining management problems in terms of self and identity)
6. Teaching new business models (that conjointly serve human flourishing and ecological regeneration) (Zsolnai, 2024)

A variety of extracurricular activities can provide further opportunities for transformational learning for economics and business students (and faculty). They include using innovative art forms (e.g., psychodrama),

working with progressive social and business enterprises, engaging in meaningful community projects at home and abroad and making field trips to get first-hand knowledge about non-Western, non-consumerist cultures and socioeconomic practices (e.g., Indigenous ones).

Architecture

Professional architectural programmes are full of required courses with little or no room for other content or material. However, including spirituality in the curriculum does not require the addition of new courses. In its simplest version, spiritual concerns may be incorporated within the content of some (certainly not all) of the classes already present in a given study programme. Given its central role in architectural education, it would be obvious to commit one design studio (where students learn how to design buildings), and one or two other courses. If such a curricular inclusion of spirituality is strategically well done, it may offer sufficient continuity and reinforcement. Bringing spirituality into those courses does not mean that such consideration should be the sole focus of the studio or course. A few learning units or assignments out of the many included in the class may be enough.

Barrie and Bermudez (2019) argue that the inclusion of spirituality in a professional architectural course could focus on one of the three fundamental ways in which architecture and spirituality meet and inform each other:

- The architectural object: the programmatic, typological and physical ways that buildings manifest and invite spirituality;
- The semiotic or communicative dimension of architecture: social, cultural and symbolic purposes vis-à-vis spirituality;
- The design/making process and the experience of architecture: spiritual dimensions of the production and/or reception of the built environment.

These three ways in which architecture and spirituality relate refer to the third-person (i.e., external, ‘objective’), second-person (i.e., dialogical or ‘intersubjective’) and first-person (i.e., internal, or ‘subjective’) dimensions in which humans engage the world (Wilber, 2007).

More specifically, bringing in spirituality into architecture means to respond to a given challenge using a holistic, transcendental and empathic understanding and attitude. This could be done by (a) inducing awe-inspiring, contemplative, or aesthetic experiences (e.g., beauty, unity, joy, the numinous); (b) promoting activities that fix social ills (e.g., inequity and injustice, environmental destruction, homelessness, racism); or (c) enabling people to realize and move beyond cultural, social, professional, or other hardwired conventions to affirm life and the common good (Bermudez, 2015).

Toward the Awakened Campus

The existing models of university education ought to be complemented with learning experiences inviting the development of the full human being. Not every class needs to engage spirituality but as a whole, professional education must invite the depth of our student’s self to come forward for observation, reflection, growth. Astin et al. (2011, p. 138) argue:

Spiritual development turns to be highly compatible with many of the more ‘traditional’ outcomes of higher education such as academic performance, leadership development, self-esteem, satisfaction with college and motivation for further education.

Integrating spirituality into higher education means at least two general and related actions: (a) to bring relational and transcendent dimensions of reality into what is being taught, and (b) to involve the student’s whole being.

These actions demand that we portray and engage the world as a non-fragmented, interconnected whole. This means studying and acknowledging the fundamental relationship between self and others at the heart of life, culture and spirit where we dwell. All empathy and interpersonal understanding are born right there. Concretely, interacting with reality should be taught as involving not just a distant ‘I-it’ (i.e., objective, third-person) but an ‘I-Thou’ (i.e., intersubjective, second-person) relationship (Benedikt, 2020; Buber, 1970).

University courses ought to make students realize that values, traditions, language, understanding, attitude, beliefs and more are constructs through which ‘others’ are directly shaping their mental, emotional and behavioural responses—mostly beyond their awareness. A pedagogy of ‘big questions’ advances this agenda because answering them unavoidably presents learners with intentions and beliefs that, in the hands of a good teacher, may be used to point at the unconscious cultural, religious, social and-or philosophical assumptions framing the students’ lives. Issues of empathy, trustworthiness, ethics, beauty, meaning, identity and self naturally arise.

Once aware of their own worldview, students begin to see those of others and thus consider multiple models of selfhood, community, relationships and reality (including justice, freedom, education and the curriculum). The capacity to perceive and take different perspectives is at the centre of empathy, lateral thinking and creativity, emotional and cultural maturity and metacognition. This is why service learning, study abroad and interdisciplinary classes succeed in delivering holistic learning and spiritual growth (Astin et al., 2011, pp. 127–128). They offer concrete ways for students to cognitively and emotionally access, understand and operate under alternative worldviews. In summary, incorporating spirituality into higher education is teaching how to sense and act from an interpersonal, dialogic viewpoint.

It is well known that the highest learning results when an individual establishes a personal relationship with what is being taught. In the last couple of decades, science has confirmed that all knowledge is fundamentally moulded by our feelings, body, intentionality and culture. The current discussion on 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive and extended) points exactly at this. If learners don’t care or relate to what is being taught, the knowledge acquired will be shallow and easily lost. Finding meaning is key and significance only comes out of a person’s interest, social context, trust in the source and/or emotional-behavioural interaction.

The Awakened Campus Initiative (Spirituality Mind Body Institute, 2023) of Columbia University Teachers College aims to create a national and international platform for spirituality, mental health and wellness development in higher education settings. It catalyses innovation and action at universities to provide students, faculty and university leaders with free and safe spaces for spiritual growth and development.


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ORCID iD

Laszlo Zsolnai  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6447-254X>

Note

1. That is, affirmation of the meaning of life; understanding the value of oneself, others and the environment; the ability to connect harmoniously with others and the environment; the possession of inner resources and strength and ability to adapt to adversity.

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