

In Their Own Words: Campus Ministers' Perceptions of Their Work and Their Worlds

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This qualitative study compared and contrasted the perceptions of roles, support, and mission of campus ministers at a large public and a small private institution in the southeastern United States. Semi-structured interviews of campus ministers, representing a variety of faith traditions, were conducted and analyzed.

Higher education in the United States began in the development of religiously affiliated and religiously governed institutions. Starting with the Calvinist founding of Harvard in 1636, a variety of Protestant denominations founded, governed and sometimes struggled over the control of an expanding number of colleges and universities. History shows that some of these remained private, religiously affiliated institutions, others transitioned into institutions operating within denominational traditions while still others became public (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976; Rudolph, 1990/1962). In general, it is believed these institutions were founded to produce clergy members leading congregations through the challenges inherent in creating a new country. In reality their institutional missions were broader, more complex and guided by the demands of a predominantly Christian culture (Thelin, 2003). While they were designed to produce church leadership, they also produced business and community leaders schooled in church, instilling Christian morals and ideals as the foundation of society (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976; Shockley, 1989).

In the nearly 370 years since the founding of Harvard, a wide spectrum of institutions of higher education has emerged. While affiliation and governance have also evolved, the necessity for places and persons oriented toward the spiritual needs of students has remained a constant in higher education. Public and private differences notwithstanding, the role of campus ministry and those filling the role of minister (or its equivalent) have changed significantly through the years. Interestingly, these positions were not present in the colonial colleges of New England and were only found in a tiny percentage of the institutions founded after them. As is the case with the evolution of student affairs (Nuss, 2003), the role of campus minister emerged when presidents and faculty members were no longer able to attend to the spiritual and moral needs of their students (Shockley, 1989). Just as the role of student affairs is constantly evolving and must be considered

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within its context, higher education, so must campus ministry be considered both within the higher education context and that broader context of the religious culture of this country.

From the colonial period to the present day, religious practice and spirituality in a multitude of forms impacted higher education. This influence and presence is evident in the variety of religiously based and affiliated institutions (Cohen, 1998). It is also apparent in the host of choices students have as they express and explore religion and spirituality as college students.

Primary documents allow us an understanding of how this ministry evolved in the recent past, both within a higher education and a societal context. In June of 1966, a time of significant social change, the University of Georgia, together with the National Campus Ministry Association, sponsored the National Campus Ministry Convocation, held in Athens at the UGA Center for Continuing Education. The theme was "Personal Wholeness and Professional Identity in the Campus Ministry." The published proceedings from the meeting list topics as diverse as "The University and the Search for Identity," "The Church and the Search for Integrity," and "The Family and the Search for Wholeness." The topic most relevant for the purposes of this study is "Why Do We Have a Campus Minister?" The author answers this question for campus ministers in terms easily understood by student affairs professionals. "You are the only one who offers the challenge that these young people, having been privileged, see through, and break through, the illusion that the future lies in security, and discover that the future lies within themselves" (Hofman, 1966, p. 8).

The proceedings from the National Campus Ministry Convocation also offer the contextual information so crucial to understanding.

Today a campus minister requires a keen and imaginative mind, together with a stubborn and courageous stand. And, as you know already, you stand in a place which has not particularly welcomed religion, not to speak of the Church. You stand at the place of which the Church, and, in turn, the religious people, have always been especially suspicious. You stand at the place where nobody really dares to claim you. You are at the periphery of both worlds, the world of the Heavenly City, which is the Church, and the world of the earthly relativists, which is Academia. (Hofman, 1966, p.3).

Nearly 40 years later a contemporary author writes, "No aspect of life is considered so important to Americans outside higher education, yet deemed so unimportant by the majority of those inside, as religion" (Wolfe, 2002). It appears that, contextually at least, much has remained the same for these campus ministers.

What is the perception by campus ministers of their role within this context? While there was a time when "chapel" was a required daily event at most institutions, and it was the responsibility of the chaplain to coordinate such events, today the perception is that chaplains and campus ministers have a far different role. At private institutions they may be full-time staff members, at public institutions they may work off-campus for a denominational group or, increasingly, for an

interdenominational ministry such as Campus Crusade for Christ or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. On some campuses, they serve as spiritual guides and may guide programmatic efforts; on others, they continue long-held traditions and conduct campus-wide services to enhance the spiritual development of students. They may also serve as off-campus support to student affairs divisions. These relationships may range from genuine partnerships enhancing the environment for students to tolerance of the other group and the work they do (Fidler, Poster, & Strickland, 1999; Thelin, 2003).

Although there was a time when student affairs divisions, especially at public institutions, distanced themselves from campus ministers and faith-based organizations, there currently seems to be more of a call for collaboration between student affairs professionals and campus ministers. Professional organizations are holding special seminars and workshops concerning spirituality on campus, establishing learning groups or networks around this issue, and publishing more on the topic.

With this historical view in mind, this qualitative study is designed to compare and contrast the perceptions of roles, and investigate the support and mission of campus ministers. We had five primary research questions that guided the study:

- (a) What is the purpose of campus ministries from the ministers' perspective?
- (b) How do campus ministers perceive the support they receive from campus administrators?
- (c) How do campus ministers perceive the spiritual climate on today's college campus?
- (d) How has the role of campus ministry changed through the years?
- (e) What do campus ministers see as their role on campus?

For the purposes of this study we defined campus minister as a person working on behalf of a religious organization on, or in relation to, a college or university campus.

This study is important because divisions of student affairs and campus ministries, regardless of configuration, connection, and placement, have the well-being of the student body as a common, unifying concern. While they may be joined on some campuses it is more likely they are separate. Greater understanding of the role and perceptions of these crucial members of the university community can lead to realization of areas for collaboration, strengthened programs, and enhanced use of resources - both off-campus and on.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods "permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail" (Patton, 1990, p.12). For the purpose of this study, campus ministers' perceptions of their role and their relationship to the university were the object of deep and detailed analysis.

Two institutions were selected for this study: a large, public, Doctoral/Research-Extensive institution and a small, private, doctoral extensive institution. Both institutions are located in the southeast. The private institution had a history of

religious affiliation but is not currently connected to a particular denomination. In the recent past, its board of trustees voted to separate the institution from any governing or financial support. Thus, it is now an independent private institution with a faith-related mission, but not tied to any one denomination.

A total of 16 people were contacted with seven agreeing to participate in the study. Solicitation of participants was purposeful. The participants represented organizations including the Catholic Center, Baptist Student Union, Episcopal Campus Ministry, Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Lutheran Campus Ministry, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, United Methodist Campus Ministry, Campus Center for Jewish Life, and Worldwide Discipleship Association. As seen, individuals from a variety of Christian and non-Christian backgrounds were solicited. At the completion of the study, only five of the seven individuals completed the formal interview due to scheduling conflicts. Thus, the final sample consisted of four males, and one female. Three participants were from the private institution and two from the public.

The participants were all from Christian traditions. Denominations represented included: Baptist Campus Ministry, Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Catholic Campus Ministry, Lutheran Campus Ministry, and Worldwide Discipleship Association. Positions of the participants were Chaplain, Campus Minister, and Denomination Liaison. All participants, with the exception of the Chaplain at the private institution, were paid by their own denominations. At the private institution there was a dual reporting structure including the Chaplain and denominational representatives. At the public institution reporting was only to the denominational representative.

Researchers developed a comprehensive interview protocol. The open-ended questions were then examined for content validity, as well as research question congruency. The protocol was revised and prepared for use. See Appendix for this protocol.

Researchers discussed the process for data collection to ensure all individuals were collecting data in a similar fashion. Two institutions were then selected based on their academic mission, affiliation, and institution history. Because of the diverse nature of campus ministry organizations, a maximum variation sample was used to ensure a variety of opinions and experiences. This was achieved through institutional selection and the array of denominations contacted for inclusion. Individuals were contacted via phone and email.

As researchers we approached this project with several assumptions. To begin, we expected to see a different climate on the two campuses. Each of us has had academic and professional experience at both public and religiously affiliated private institutions. Based on personal experience, more differences and fewer similarities were expected. The final assumption centers on the issue of mission. While we believe the mission of campus ministry and student affairs to be similar at both institutions, it is thought that students attending the small religiously affiliated institution would see a more seamless environment and those attending

the large doctoral granting institution would be less likely to see connections between the secular and the religious and/or spiritual.

There are several limitations to consider when reading the results of this study. The timing at which the data were collected presented an interesting challenge. At both institutions, campus ministry is less of a presence during summer months. The researchers began soliciting participants during a time when ministers were leaving campus for vacation, and to conduct other duties required by their specific denominations. As such, many ministers were unable to participate in the study. Additionally, because of the timing of data collection, the sample is not balanced by gender with only one of the five participants interviewed being female.

A second limitation of this study is the lack of a non-Christian perspective. When the various campus "ministers" were contacted, only those from a Christian doctrine responded as willing to participate in the study. Therefore, results should be read with this consideration in mind.

Lastly, a limitation present in all qualitative studies is the nature of qualitative data. Because a small population was studied, results are not necessarily representative of all campus ministers and are therefore not generalizable. Also inherent in qualitative research is the concern for researcher bias. Because the researcher serves as the instrument for analysis, this is also considered a limitation. Discussion as to how biases were controlled for will be discussed during the data analysis section.

Prior to beginning the data analysis process, the researchers examined the information to ensure all data were present and complete (Patton, 1990). Additionally, transcripts were distributed to participants for member checks to ensure content validation. Content analysis, defined as, "the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton, 1990), was used to analyze data collected from the interview protocol. The result was a three-stage approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990): (a) open coding, where concepts in the data were identified, (b) axial coding, where the open codes were categorized, and (c) finally, selective coding, where core categories and themes were identified. Once the categories were identified, the researchers extrapolated the combined information to separate description from interpretation (Patton, 1990). Peer debriefing, as well as the member check technique described above, was utilized to ensure rigor, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of analyzed data (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001).

Emergent Themes

Findings for this study relate to the five research questions previously outlined. Four themes emerged and answered the original research questions. These are (a) role definition, (b) facilities, (c) spiritual climate, and (d) relationship with student affairs.

Theme One: Definition of Role

There is an overarching theme of role definition among campus ministers, which encompasses a variety of duties. These duties include (a) non-obtrusive evangelism, (b) being present with students' in their faith journey, and (c) programming.

The initial role definition came in response to the demographic question "For whom do you work?" This was asked to help ascertain the perception of the context within which each individual works. All participants answered similarly. They first defined themselves within the context of the institution followed by their work with students.

Each campus minister described working for his or her respective religious organization, such as Presbyterian Church (USA), Catholic Church, Worldwide Discipleship Association, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. However, their perceptions include more than mere organizational affiliation. One campus minister interviewed was the university's chaplain and stated,

I work for the university. I don't work for God; I attempt to listen to God. You labor in the vineyard for the Lord. I get paid by the university, the filthy lucre that takes care of all my needs and an occasional cigar.

All campus ministers saw the campus community as the focus of their ministry; only one identified the university as the entity for which he or she actually worked. Ministers described themselves as agents of their denominations with the inherent mission and focus of those denominations as a foundation for their work on individual campuses.

The first sub-theme emerging from the data was evangelism. Each campus minister discussed the considerable amount of time they spend sharing their own faith and encouraging the spiritual development of students, faculty, and staff. "I try to encourage students to see a broader picture of Christianity than what they grew up with. I like to see them grow toward a less fundamental and more open-minded view of the Bible." Others supported this theme by espousing an individual approach as sometimes the best way to share the "word." "Each student is at a different place. Discipleship should be gauged to where the student is spiritually. It is important to integrate emotional and relationship principles into discipleship and spirituality." In addition, someone noted, "You have to take them by the hand and move them one step at a time. They can't move more than one step at a time and each step is very difficult." Lastly, one minister put it this way, "I've learned that campus ministry is about relationships and that has not changed over the years." Thus "reaching" students comes through person-to-person communication, and work.

The second sub theme regarding campus ministers' role is the principle of being present with students in their faith journey. One minister stated, "Students come to us ready to take standardized tests, ready to close everything in their mind. But they are all dealing with spirituality and we need to relate mind AND spirit because that was the way we were made." A second minister stated,

Some come from different experiences, and we realize that they are unable to withstand the perils of life, they are troubled, and that pain is sometimes the entry into maturity and growth. It presents life in its contingency, and it is a journey...So, if I am trying to get them to focus, I would have them read poetry...or other stuff that clearly focuses on the journey and God's role in the journey.

Campus ministers regarded their role in students' growth and development as a critical component of the faith journey. Regardless of campus context the campus ministers take their role in facilitating student development seriously. Each described that process differently, but believed in his or her influence in students' development.

They want to be left alone with their ideas. They need to open up and learn and be less judgmental to others. This is a very important part of my job-to help them be less judgmental." Another minister reflected, "It is part of our job to help them develop or mature. We expose both them and the university community to the Word, to opportunities to be civically responsible.

Overall, these campus ministers care deeply for the students they serve. They are concerned about the choices students make such as consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. They each have a strong desire to listen to students and expose them to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Lastly, they want students to leave campus as responsible citizens with an ability to think critically about the world around them.

Programming emerged as the final role sub-theme. Most campus ministers described their role on campus in context of the events they sponsored. They each discussed many programs they host such as weekly meals for students, finals week snacks, small group seminars, parents weekend events, formal services, and outreach events in prominent locations on campus. Events at the small private university are held in campus facilities in the student union typically. At the large state institution, events are held at the facilities of each group, for example the Catholic Center, Wesley Foundation, or Baptist Student Union.

Theme Two: Facilities

The second theme emerging from the data is the physical structure of campus ministry. Providing a place for fellowship for students, faculty, and staff was deemed as important and an integral part of campus ministry. As stated, campus ministers believed the physical buildings where each ministry was located should be a place where individuals can grow spiritually, feel safe to share their faith, and ask questions.

The operation of ministry offices and "unions" was a point of difference between the private and public institution. Participants at the public institution stated their facilities were typically owned and operated by individual denominations. As such, most of the work and activities take place in these buildings. Offices are also housed within each facility. Depending on the proximity to campus proper, each group's facility may or may not be indicated on the campus map. Students seeking

a campus minister must know the address of a specific denomination in order to find the campus minister. At the private institution, office space is provided free of charge. "All we have to pay is telephone, secretarial support, and office supplies." Additionally, activities and events are typically scheduled in the student union, and office space is easily accessible to all students as ministers are housed within one complex.

Theme Three: Spiritual Climate

When asked about the spiritual climate on campus, participants from both institutions shared a similar message. Ministers mentioned the observation that only approximately 10% of students actively participated in formal religious activities. One remarked, "There is significant social ministry activity among the students through volunteer work in programs such as Habitat for Humanity, shelters, for the food bank, etc." Another minister stated,

Students are more concerned about what to wear on a date than eternal matters. It makes it difficult to have them see a need for spirituality in their lives. Affluence of students is also present and they don't think they need spirituality.

When describing the beliefs held by students regarding spirituality, most ministers described those beliefs as fundamental. One participant stated that she does not see a wide range of beliefs and that most students are very fundamental or conservative in their ideas. Another stated, "Those who are active in campus Christian groups are definitely right-of-center theologically. That is true politically also." One noted, "Even though there are representatives from every state in the Union in the student body, the ethos is still southern, and southerners attend worship more regularly than other areas of the country."

It is of interest to note that campus ministers at the public university each discussed the classroom environment with respect to spirituality on campus. They expressed concern for comments from faculty regarding their own faith traditions and statements that students have made regarding their discomfort on numerous occasions. "The academic environment is very secular and humanistic. The classroom is very anti-spiritual." In addition, one participant stated, "I'd prefer teachers not say such things about Catholics. We are not cannibals."

Theme Four: Relationship with Student Affairs

In regard to the question asking ministers to whom they report and for whom do you work, the campus ministers at the small, private university described a clear connection to the campus administration. The campus chaplain for many years reported to the president of the college and now reports to the vice president for student affairs. The other campus ministers report to the chaplain. Because of this reporting structure, they each see themselves as being a part of the campus. In each instance, participants' salaries were provided by the religious organizations they represent. In addition, with the exception of the campus chaplain, each of the ministers has offices in one common suite on campus, located adjacent to the main campus quadrangle. Students in need of support or guidance can go to this area

and seek out a campus minister from the denomination with which they are most comfortable. The administration clearly supports the activities of the campus ministers by allocating space in a prominent area of campus and having a direct reporting structure from the chaplain to the vice president for student affairs. One participant describes the relationship between campus ministry and the administration this way: "The quality of the relationship is excellent. The flow chart has the Campus Ministry under the Division of Student Life."

The view of the campus ministry at the large, public, state university is quite different. At this institution there is no campus chaplain hired by the university. If one examined organizational charts, no position of chaplain or any campus minister would be included. One position, the assistant vice president for student affairs, does have a liaison relationship with the Campus Ministry Association, although no formal reporting structure exists. Campus ministers at this state institution describe their relationship with the administration as "a good one." There is an understanding on the part of campus ministers that they can contact the assistant vice president for student affairs with questions if a need arises. The ministers noted they have been included in the university's efforts to respond to the tragedy of September 11th, Martin Luther King, Jr., Week celebrations, and other special events. They also commented that the Campus Ministry Association was sometimes helpful. They also found it good to meet with the representatives from the other groups. However, other times, they thought the meetings were not helpful and wished they could have more interaction with other staff and faculty besides their designated liaison, the assistant vice president for student affairs.

Interviews with these campus ministers revealed their conception of a complex, multifaceted role in their work with students and in the purpose of their ministry on campus, inclusive of creating a welcoming fellowship, being present with students on their faith journeys and supporting students in their development. This has not changed for these campus ministers over the course of their work in these positions. Their general perception of the support they receive from their respective administrations is that it is at least adequate, and good in some cases. They defined the spiritual climate on their campuses in terms of both religious participation and community and social justice activities. While those actively practicing their religion is a small percentage of students (10%) they see spirituality expressed in other forms such as swinging a hammer on a Habitat for Humanity home.

Implications

When studying the differences between the two campuses, we found a stronger institutionalized religious presence at the private institution. However, it is also interesting to note that someone with no knowledge of this institution and its historical ties to the Baptist Convention would find it difficult to learn this from a casual perusal of the institutional website. The type of general information contained in pages designed for prospective students, parents, and those designed for the curious public gives no mention of this connection. It is only when one reads in greater depth, in a document such as remarks from the President, that this

tie is revealed and references to the importance of both religion and religious tolerance and inclusion are found. There is significant language related to serving the good of humanity as one intended outcome after study at this institution but very few religious references.

Our assumption as researchers, all having worked on both public and religiously affiliated campuses, was that we would see a marked difference between these two campuses in terms of a sense of religiosity, openly expressed faith and an organizational structure supportive of this. We did find the organizational structure that formally included campus ministry in place at the private institution. The extent of this was employment of a campus chaplain and the provision of office space and support for campus ministers hired by denominations represented on campus. Most of these campus ministers served in a part-time capacity. With the exception of a desire for more direct connection with student affairs at the public institution, what we heard about role, function, and campus climate in relationship to faith related issues was very similar between these two institutions.

As noted, the interviews also reveal a desire on the part of interviewed campus ministers for more connection with and outreach from student affairs at the public institution. Clearly, the campus ministers are speaking the language of student affairs in their comments about student development and learning. Our language is very similar in describing the more dualistic mindset of many students. Sometimes student affairs staffs are hesitant to utilize the campus ministers to assist in responding to crises or to assist in developing new initiatives or programs, when in fact, many of our students may benefit from interaction with these professionals. They care deeply about students and, from our interactions with each of them, have much to offer. Our mission in student affairs to keep students first could only be enhanced by a stronger coalition and connection with these professionals.

It is important to note that the role of campus ministers is often times defined by the denominations with which they work. Student affairs professionals, especially at public institutions, need to understand such denominational expectations and be willing to work collaboratively with ministers who work from a paradigm which could be fundamentally different from that used by most student affairs professionals. This is an area where it is important to move beyond differences to the fundamental connection between campus ministry and student affairs at any public institution. That connection is our mandate to serve students as effectively as possible. The desire for their good is the bridge that can span any chasm.

Facility location is another area where connections can be strengthened. The private institution is able to centralize campus ministry offices on campus, enabling students to readily find and access these services. While the public institution does not do this, and would not be expected to, administrators there could be conscious of informing students of the location of these facilities. When we examine maps and directories of this institution, finding the location of campus ministers and their facilities is difficult. We also need to think intentionally about all the services available to support and assist the student body, beyond those provided by the institution. While we cannot govern their facility location, at most public

institutions we can be conscious of educating faculty, staff, and students as to their location, mission, and services. For private institutions able to do so, providing locations that are near or on campus, easy for students to locate, and in close proximity to one another is critical to the full connection.

The spiritual climate on any given campus is contingent upon the history and tradition of the place, the mission and goals of the institution, the students attending, and other contextual factors such as geographic location. The campus ministers participating in this study do not see themselves as evangelists, but more as religious pluralists, working to meet a range of religious and spiritual needs presented by their students and the broader campus community. Depending on the context of the campus and the students attending this may or may not be meeting the religious and spiritual needs of the students. Keeping abreast of the changing demographics of the student population will be important in defining the future direction of campus ministers. Student affairs is in an excellent position to aid in this assessment and help define who the student body is and what they may need from campus ministry. This is especially relevant and crucial as we work with student populations that are increasingly religiously diverse. This is not just in terms of organized religions ranging from Judaism to Hinduism to Buddhism to Christianity but includes emerging faith traditions and spiritualism that are less formally organized and span a wide spectrum of religiously liberal and conservative views (Rooney, 2003; Wolfe, 2002).

Campus ministry is one of a number of organizations with whom student affairs works collaboratively on behalf of the student body. As we have learned through experience our students are best served when there is a seamless environment. We know this about student learning and all the other educational aspects of life on a college campus. Differences in divisions, offices, and departments become less challenging when collaboration is encouraged and supported and alliances are formed. It is the role of student affairs to forge such partnerships for the benefit of our students. Our recent history instructs and compels us to understand, especially around matters of faith and spirituality, the exceptional importance of openness, receptivity, and discourse.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Demographics:

1. What is your title?
2. What is your religious affiliation?
3. For whom do you work?
4. How long have you been in this position?
5. How long have you done this type of work?

Role, Function, and Perceptions:

1. Describe your role as a campus minister.
2. What do you believe to be the purpose of campus ministry on your campus?
3. How do you view your role on campus?
4. What is the mission of your ministry?
5. What is your relationship with the administration at your institution?
6. What is your relationship, if any, with the division of student affairs at your institution? If one exists please describe it.
7. Is there a formal liaison relationship between you as a campus minister and any administrative unit on campus?
8. If you could change anything about your relationships with administrators what would it be?
9. How would you describe the spiritual climate on your campus including student behavior related to issues of spirituality and religion?
10. What do you believe to be your role in student growth and development?
11. Describe the evolution of your role as a campus minister since beginning your tenure in this position.
12. Please reflect on what you learned, knew and believed about being a campus minister - has this changed as a result of your work as a campus minister?
13. Is there anything I've not asked you that is important for me to know about being a campus minister? If so, what is that?