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Identifying Cognitive Dissonance in Religious or Spiritual College Students: A Proposal to Act

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A proposal to act

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ABSTRACT

For the most part, religion and academia maintain compatible views. A few instances of contradiction, though, may induce cognitive dissonance in students working to integrate the two. Such dissonance can result in a cognitive stalemate; the students cannot move forward in their faith or their discipline because they are unable to reconcile one with the other. In an effort to prevent the dissonance from affecting students' academic performances, universities can offer the guidance of spiritual professors who have already reconciled their faith and discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Interactions with religious students at Grand Valley State University have led me to wonder whether a perceived incompatibility between faith and reason has prevented some from fully reaching their academic and spiritual potentials. These students appear to linger between accepting and rejecting their classroom material, which ultimately stalls them from moving forward academically and excelling in their courses. Other students have expressed concerns that their intended field of study requires them to compromise some of their core religious beliefs or morals. The students who refuse to forfeit their faiths select other career paths that do not put them in a position to choose between faith and reason. Thus, they may not be fully living to their potential, especially if they have a particular aptitude for the controversial field.

If the potential of students is, in fact, being stunted or re-routed to other fields due to secular and religious incompatibilities, then communities — local, national and global — are likely not achieving to their potential. This problem is not without solution, though. Fortunately, many religions are compatible with secular knowledge (UCLA); they have recognized the validity of, say, scientific findings and have re-interpreted their scriptures and traditions to account for academic advancements. The problem arises in the few instances of valid contradiction and when people who prescribe to a particular faith misunderstand or are taught flawed doctrines.

This meta-research thesis is meant to discuss the possible limitations that religious students experience in college and explore opportunities for public institutions like GVSU to circumvent the problem.

RELIGIOSITY OF THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY

Religion is a facet of the lives of most Americans. In 2012, the U.S. Census reported that

only about 34,169,000 of the approximately 216,367,000 people who answered the American

Religious Identification Survey had no religion. If these figures accurately reflect the U.S.

population, they suggest that 84.2 percent of Americans practice — or at the very least identify

with — a religion. All other countries throughout the world have at least a slim population of

religious people, too (CIA).

This degree of religiosity is well reflected in the American collegiate population. From

2003 to 2010, the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California - Los

Angeles conducted a longitudinal study of the religiosity and spirituality of college students. The

National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose surveyed faculty and

students to discover their spiritual preferences and the extent to which they practice.

The student survey revealed a few things. First, it indicated that most students (about 80

percent) believe in God, value spirituality and occasionally attend religious services. The study

also discovered that students involved in spiritual or religious practices report higher satisfaction

with their social lives and overall college experience than their non-religious peers, and they also

earn higher grade point averages. Other researchers have found similarly favorable effects of

religious practice in college, including a positive correlation between religiosity and leadership

(Gehrke) and cognitive development (Love).

Meanwhile, the UCLA faculty survey, completed by 40,670 professors at 421 colleges,

reported four-fifths of respondents self-identifying as spiritual, and more than three-fifths

consider themselves religious, which is an observance echoed by the research of Gross and

Simmons. Almost one half said that integrating spirituality into their everyday lives is essential

or important.

These figures affirm that religion is a prevalent force not only in the U.S. but also within

its universities. Thus, it is a factor of wide relevance and impact.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE RELIGIOUS IN ACADEMIA

As the above studies made evident, religion is highly prevalent in academia, both among students and their professors. In many — if not most — cases, religion and academia exist harmoniously. Some note that the two methods of inquiry are integrated, and others say they exist separately. Still, there are more who contest that religious and academic ideas are incompatible. This perceived incompatibility has been noted in a few particular cases, mostly in the realm of science.

Evolution, for example, is a topic largely perceived to be incompatible with the beliefs of creationist Christians (Mazur). Perhaps the most recognizable cases of conflict, though, occur in classes focused on life issues. In these courses, morality comes into play as students assess their academic material and work to incorporate it in their pre-established religious schemas. For example, many religions' attitudes toward homosexuality as a chosen sin have resulted in a general lack of acceptance of the idea that homosexuality is a biological predisposition (Whitehead; Baker, Whitehead). On top of that, stem cell research, climate changes and plate tectonic theories meet religious opposition (Sherkat). The rejection of knowledge that is increasingly accepted among academics ostracizes some religious students from serious academic debates and closes them off from attaining their highest degrees of educational performance.

These perceived incompatibilities might also perhaps contribute to the development of cognitive dissonance in religious students, and the manifestations of said dissonance may prove detrimental not only to the student but to academia in general.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

The primary focus of this aggregate research is the cognitive dissonance experienced by religious students and the extent to which that dissonance hinders academic performance. Cognitive dissonance describes a state of mental discomfort when a person's attitudes and behaviors are inconsistent, or when a person is confronted with two ideas that are logically inconsistent (Festinger). Inconsistency between thoughts and behaviors motivates people to change their attitudes or beliefs to rebuild consistency (Carkenord, Bullington) and alleviate the psychological distress. People seek to maintain harmony and consistency between what they know to be true and what they believe to be true (Burns), and the relief of this dissonance has been an object of psychological study in the past few decades.

Some studies have suggested that the psychological distress of cognitive dissonance is manifested in a number of cognitive affectations and symptoms. Puustinen addresses a few: depression, anxiety and stress; prevention of self-actualization and social connection with others; and loss of sleep. It is the consideration of these potentially debilitating symptoms among religious academics that drives this research.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN RELIGIOUS COLLEGE STUDENTS

Psychologists often maintain different theories regarding human mental stages. Tite references one detailing four stages of cognitive growth for students of faith backgrounds: literal, conventional, critical and conjunctive modes of understanding. The critical stage rejects notions of mythical worlds established during childhood (literal stage) and adheres the thinker to the concrete world; the conjunctive stage arises when the thinker can integrate the mythical and concrete worlds in an informed fashion. The author of the theory suggests that college students are generally in the critical stage. Thus, college is the vehicle through which they objectively analyze their faith and decide its value within their schemas. As the author notes, students have a

difficult time reconciling their "mythical" and concrete worlds during the critical development stage. For hyper-religious students, this momentary inability to reconcile the two establishes dissonance.

Some studies suggest that the development of critical thinking skills, in general, or the encouragement to think differently can generate cognitive dissonance within students who perceive their critical eye to undermine their faith (Burns). Tite, in his article titled "On the Necessity of Crisis: A Reflection on Pedagogical Conflict and the Academic Study of Religion," writes: "Many students face a type of cognitive dissonance when faced with the critical-analytical approach in the academic study of religion." This dissonance presumably resides in other departments, too, including those related to the challenges listed above and some that may not be perceived controversial. After all, if a religion teaches students to reject evolution and biological attributes of homosexuality, then a course that teaches the validity of both concepts would necessarily foster cognitive dissonance in that student, who must sift through contradictory theories.

Although inconsistencies in academia and religion do exist, not many studies have been conducted to measure students' cognitive dissonance in that respect. One, however, examined the dissonance in nursing majors at a religious college when learning about mental health. The researchers found that highly religious students consider divine intervention to be a significant aspect of the healing process (Lederach). Thus, these students put greater emphasis on healing by spiritual rather than physical methods. While the extent to which the dissonance was debilitating was not measured, the recognized presence of conflicting beliefs (e.g. academia stressed physical healing while faith taught spiritual healing) could potentially affect the students' decisions when providing patient care in the future. Thus, the dissonance may not so much prove to be a hindrance during the educational process as it would in the field.

Similar situations may occur in other areas of study. Consider, for example, end of life directives for pre-medical students, immoral script standards for film majors, and separation of church and state requirements for elementary education students. The industry standards do not necessarily induce dissonance as religious students learn theory in the classroom, but they will most certainly pose problems once those students face them in the field. While no studies have been found to support this theory, it can be inferred that religious students who experience the dissonance prematurely in the classroom may feel strongly enough about their faiths to evade the practical situations altogether; they may select a different area of study. This is only one of a few different options that students face when confronted with dissonance. Other methods of dissonance reduction will be discussed in the following section.

(It should be noted that the degree to which students experience dissonance is directly related to the intensity of their religiosity (Markovic). Therefore, not all religious students experience dissonance, but those with firm convictions are more prone to the experience. It is also important to clarify that there may not always be contradiction where a student perceives one to be, thus rendering the cognitive dissonance unnecessary. Many misunderstand the teachings of their faith group or have been taught distortions of the religion, and this leads to unnecessary dissonance in the classroom.)

STUDENT RESPONSES TO COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

In general, studies have found that people cling to their core beliefs, defend them against threats, and, consequently, process information in a biased way that allows preservation of these beliefs (Gal, Rucker). Thus, religious beliefs may trump and inhibit educational attainments when the two are in opposition. However, this reaction is not the only one that has been recognized when dissonance occurs in the classroom. Students respond to their induced

dissonance in varied ways. Tite testifies:

> I've watched as students, some with tears in their eyes, have dropped out of
> courses and programs due to the strain and tension they felt in their inadequacy to
> reconcile faith commitment with academic integrity — others who have used such
> moments to denounce the secular university as being evil and out to destroy the
> Church or even a clear sign of the moral decay within church-related schools;
> others I've watched develop a cynical sneering attitude towards their religious
> heritage, some of whom have emerged as either atheists or as committed and
> informed members of those same traditions.

These specific responses can be summarized in broader terms; Burns recognizes that students can respond to the generated cognitive dissonance in four general ways: "the learner can reject the new idea by denying the dissonant elements, she can reduce the importance of the dissonant ideas, he [sic] can increase the importance of consonant ideas, or she might add new consonant elements to justify the dissonant situation." In the case of the first response, Burns — in agreement with Tite — warns that the student might intentionally misunderstand classroom material; s/he refuses to learn so as to prevent consciously identifying and facing a challenge to his/her faith. Meanwhile, the second student might deny the importance of the subject or take a relativist approach to prevent further consideration of views opposing pre-existing beliefs. The third and fourth students employ different measures to downplay the extent to which the ideas oppose, and they focus instead on the commonalities to incorporate the new information into their religious schemas.

These four options are not the only ones employed by students; other researchers have identified an extra response: religious doubt (Gal, Rucker). In this case, the new information is not immediately denied, but rather it is given fair consideration alongside students' religious

notions. The doubt that might arise could potentially pose a threat to the student's psychological and physical health, as it has been known to spark depression (Krause, Wulff).

Thus, the dissonance caused by religious and academic inconsistencies may prove beneficial or detrimental to students' academic careers depending on how they respond to it. Tite writes that, in his experience, the students who earnestly engage classroom knowledge and thus experience cognitive dissonance will use those moments as challenges to overcome.

THE NECESSITY OF DISSONANCE

It is important to note that this dissonance is not necessarily negative. Both Tite and Burns note that cognitive dissonance could positively affect students by shifting them into a class of higher thinking and helping them fashion more informed beliefs. The dissonance tends to arise in students during "crisis moments," which are often dismissed by professors but are of significant value to students by serving as an unavoidable moment of liminality between two modes of thinking (Tite). Tite further argues that these crisis moments are critical to the learning experience, so professors should nurture students through them. He writes, "Liminality, as the threshold of transitional ambiguity, is wrought with danger and potential for moving in various or diverse directions and perhaps no direction at all." Tite notes that the jarring state of liminality provides an opportunity for professors to capitalize on moldable minds and encourage academic growth. Educators should thus be concerned with ensuring that students move forward rather than remain stagnant or revert to former, less sophisticated ways of thinking when lingering in this state.

WHY THIS DISSONANCE IS IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS

Although dissonance has been seen to carry benefits, it is still an issue that threatens

various facets of academia. The health of the student is the first to be addressed. As noted previously, cognitive dissonance may include symptoms of sleep loss and depression (Puustinen). Some studies have also shown that students whose faiths are challenged experience higher levels of stress and anger compared to their counterparts (Schafer). Others perhaps take on the inconsistencies with higher rational thinking and evade the anger; as mentioned earlier, one way that students could respond to recognized contradictions is by critically examining both their religion and their educational experience. This examination, if earnest, may lead to doubts about their convictions. According to studies, people who experience doubts about their beliefs are more inclined to be dissatisfied with their health and feel depressed than firm believers (Krause, Wulff). While depressive and unhealthy states are most obviously harmful in themselves, they are also not conducive to proper cognitive growth. Thus, in order to ensure that students have a healthy and generally useful college experience, universities may wish to curtail the dissonance that they experience.

Even beyond the individual, though, the dissonance has an effect. The public academy, if it allows the dissonance to dissuade students from earnestly pursuing a degree, might possibly lose qualified and potentially world-changing students. Burns writes:

> Cognitive development itself occurs when students successfully negotiate the challenges offered by the educational process. But Cognitive Dissonance Theory tells us that very likely none of these goals will be achieved for some students if dissonance is not taken into consideration … When dissonance is too high and support is not provided, the internal conflict aroused can be destructive to cognitive development.

This is an issue of high importance because many religious people are inhibited by their faith — whether valid or misconceived — to actively pursue certain disciplines. Whether a

coincidence or correlation, one study found that religion, more so than any other factor, plays a significant role in scientific illiteracy levels in the U.S. (Sherkat). Other studies have shown that certain Christian faiths are highly underrepresented in the sciences and the professorial field, in general (Ecklund); agnostics and atheists dominated the fields. These findings support the concept that religious people, who are prone to cognitive dissonance, experience a delay in or impediment to cognitive development. Lederach writes, "Of very special concern is that increased dissonance and subsequent anxiety frequently result in misinterpretation or misperception of new information and will thus result in a poor learning experience." If students are inhibited — even temporarily — from developing their minds, their career potential is stunted, or at the very least delayed. Therefore, universities must take into consideration the effect of dissonance on their students if they are truly invested in the pupils' success.

TESTIMONY

One Catholic student at GVSU rejected certain information that she learned in her human genetics class because it supported the theory of evolution. During the early part of the semester, she had trouble moving beyond this inconsistency to absorb further knowledge. Had she been guided to realize true Catholic teaching (the church acknowledges evolutionary theory), she would have immediately accepted the classroom knowledge (as she now does) and been enabled to move forward — and possibly excel — in the course.

"…I had a brilliant philosophy student in a biblical ethics course, and while he was very open to critically engaging issue of metaphysics as well as theology and history, when it came to the Bible an impenetrable wall immediately, and defensively, went up. Another student, who was in a lesbian relationship and very gay positive in her thinking, struggled with the application of a

critical analytical paradigm to homonegativity in a course addressing Christianity and queer theory. Both struggled in their process of cognitive dissonance, the latter picking up the challenge and, without rejecting her prescriptive value system, moved ahead with the learning process; the former, however, refused to critically engage the Bible, seeing such an approach as a complete and irreconcilable threat to his faith, and consequently, and to my own frustration and disappointment, dropped the course."

-- Philip Tite, "On the Necessity of Crisis"

METHODS OF DISSONANCE REDUCTION

The psychological discomfort that comes from dissonance can be alleviated in a few identified ways (DeBono). One such method is to mitigate the importance of the inconsistency; the dissonance will still exist, but it will not be regarded so important that it impedes forward movement by the students. Another method is the addition of consonant factors. The thinker conceives of different ways in which the two ideas are compatible in order to detract from their inherent differences. A third way is to change one of the inconsistent views. This method is perhaps the least valuable in a university setting. As previously mentioned, people are most often inclined to retain their core beliefs than accept new information, so this means of dissonance reduction would likely hinder students academically.

Burns also notes that dissonance, which has been compared to guilt, can be relieved by confession. He writes, "If this is correct, students who have parents, friends, and pastors to whom they can express their feelings will receive affirmation, reassurance, and thus alleviation of dissonance, which might then allow them to maintain pre-classroom attitudes." This method appears the most productive in university settings; it gives students a fair opportunity to retain

their beliefs and incorporate academic ideas into their schemas.

A final option is simply to ensure that both the religious and academic ideas are entirely understood. Religious and academic views, as previously mentioned, are generally not mutually exclusive and can be considered compatible. However, many people falsely believe they are incompatible and thus experience unnecessary dissonance. For example, in some denominations, evolutionary theory is misunderstood to stand opposite religious doctrine. Some Catholics, for example, are unaware that the church has nodded to the possibility of evolution, and they insist on maintaining the creationist standpoint. One study found that most U.S. Christian denominations were, in fact, expressly compatible with the theory of evolution, in spite of lay people's survey results suggesting otherwise (Martin). While true creationist Christians may maintain little hope of moving forward in this particular academic realm, those who act simply on misinformation are prevented — for no apparent reason — from engaging in critical thinking about the Earth's development and possibly contributing to new theories. This suggests a disconnect between what students think their church preaches and what their church actually teaches. Therefore, efforts to clarify religious teachings may prevent some instances of cognitive dissonance.

BUDGET-CONSCIOUS SOLUTIONS

As previously mentioned, there are certainly opportunities for universities to intervene to hasten students' dissonance processes. At least for those brief moments of liminality defined by Tite, the direction of students' lives is undetermined. As they face contradictions between their spiritual and mental worlds, an opportunity arises to sway them on either path. The intervention of a professor — as implied by Burns — could make the difference between winning students as thoughtful, religious academics or allowing them to stray away from academia in order to

maintain their faith views. Essentially, intervention is possible, and investigating methods to get involved in students' liminal states might preserve the student body and prevent the loss of any minds. Perhaps professors can be spared of the Philip-Tite moment, wherein they recognize their failure to maintain a single student.

While considering different dissonance-reducing tactics to employ at universities, there are a few important factors to keep in mind. The primary one is that neither religion nor academic success should be valued over the other. It is important that we not let one method of thought win out, but that we instead encourage reconciliation of beliefs that allow a person to accept both.

After all, a mutually beneficial relationship can be seen between faith and reason. Religious people have contributed much to academia and are often driven by their faith (Gross, Simmons). For example, Jesuits were strongly involved in the development of evolutionary theory, and Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippa contributed much to philosophy. Without the drive of faith, which supplied meaning to their actions, these figures might not have contributed as much to academia. Furthermore, studies have found that religiosity of students is positively correlated with an increased amount of study time and extracurricular involvement and negatively related to time spent at parties (Mooney). Some research also suggests that religiosity of students increases their educational attainment (Loury). Mooney writes, "For students attending selective colleges, and who therefore are already highly motivated toward academic success, their religion might help them find a sense of purpose or meaning in their work that could ultimately make the time they spend at it both more personally fulfilling and more productive." Therefore, taking away faith could decrease academic success, and taking away academics could limit the faith. Neither should be encouraged or valued over the other, but their development should be fostered simultaneously.

Considering this concept, there are a few options that universities can employ to alleviate the dissonance of their students and encourage both spiritual and cognitive development. During the study conducted by UCLA, a symposium was held to open discussion between professors and administrators from multiple schools to discuss methods of addressing students' spiritual needs in college. While the dialogue did not focus on students with cognitive dissonance, it considered more broadly the issue of spirituality. Those involved in the discussion proposed the following programs: advising or mentoring, speaker programs, chaplaincy programs, living/learning communities, and community partnerships, among others.

Some of these had already been carried out by universities around the country. Many colleges have implemented programs to encourage students to integrate their faiths and academic disciplines. This integration exposes students to the compatibility of each, thus allowing them to pursue both without any qualms. Furthermore, one could presume that the encouraged integration enhances students' pursuits of both and incentivizes them to be high achievers. After all, if students understand how their academic disciplines contribute to their faith, they might feel a stronger religious responsibility or calling to work hard and accomplish much in their fields. Thus, these programs should certainly be considered if the goal of the university is to foster informed community leaders.

Many of the existing integration programs are housed in and sponsored by religiously affiliated institutions. However, the methods that they use should not be discounted without consideration. Villanova University, a Roman Catholic college in Pennsylvania, has developed a mentor program for its students — regardless of religious affiliation. The program leaders work to promote integration of faith and reason to construct a healthy perspective of the world. The center is said to be "a place where transformative, intellectual life is in dialogue with all faith traditions. The Center for Faith and Learning seeks to provide opportunities for students, faculty

and staff to grow in knowledge of the intersections between and among religion, faith, learning and lived experience. To this end, the Center is always ready to collaborate with these constituencies of the Villanova community, inclusive of religious affiliation, to explore how faith not only enriches our lives, but also the community of which we are members." Villanova is not the only university with this resource. Liberty University, among others, has worked to encourage students to integrate faith and reason with its own version of the program.

Such programs are also not unprecedented at GVSU, which is the birthplace of the intercollegiate Catholic Professional Mentor Program and Lecture Series. This pilot program promotes mentorship between Catholic students and professors and opens dialogue between Catholic thinkers from all disciplines to help one another build a greater vision of the world. The group hosted Catholics from a variety of academic departments during its inaugural lectures, which addressed the intersection of Catholicism and (1) American politics and (2) biomedical sciences. GVSU's own professors delivered the lectures and answered questions from student attendees regarding seeming inconsistencies between faith and reason. The professors involved in this program have agreed to support Catholic students from their disciplines — outside of the classroom — by helping them work through quandaries involving their religion and discipline. They also offer a sort of academic advising that involves a spiritual element; students can discuss their perceived "calling" or "vocation" in an atmosphere of respect and understanding.

Similar programs have been developed by private faith-based groups at public and non-religious private universities in the U.S. For example, Michigan State University, Yale University and the University of California Los Angeles are three of many schools that maintain chapters of Esteem. This Catholic mentorship program fosters leadership by Catholic students in their individual fields. The programs are run through the schools' on-campus parishes or student organizations — not the universities, themselves — so the public identity is retained. In housing

these programs, though, these universities have encouraged the integration of faith and reason and have contributed to the alleviation of dissonance. The students at these schools are given the opportunity to espouse their classroom knowledge with their religious aspirations — a marriage that encourages high achievement.

PROPOSAL FOR GVSU

To introduce a proposal for GVSU, a reference to the UCLA survey is necessary. The study found that many students have high expectations for the involvement of their institutions in their spiritual development, and almost half of the students surveyed noted that it is essential or important for colleges to encourage their spiritual expression. Unfortunately, two-thirds of the survey takers reported that their professors have never encouraged spiritual or religious discussions. Furthermore, almost half of the students said they were dissatisfied with the extent to which their college experience provided opportunities to reflect spiritually or religiously. Upon conclusion of the survey, researchers discovered that students value spirituality and expect their colleges to support their spiritual growth.

However, there was disagreement between faculty respondents as to the extent to which an undergraduate education should prioritize students' spiritual development. About 30 percent agreed with the idea that "colleges should be concerned with facilitating students' development;" certain disciplines placed higher emphasis on this concept than others, with professors in the health sciences (41 percent) and humanities (40 percent) having the highest rate of agreeable respondents. However, more than half of the surveyed faculty disagreed with the idea that "the spiritual dimension of faculty members' lives has no place in the academy." Considering these results, it is my belief that both students and faculty members would be interested in and supportive of the development of a spiritual support program at GVSU.

With that being said, the programs listed above are different from what GVSU could possibly implement. Its capacity is limited by its identity as a public institution. However, a similar model could be pursued.

GVSU can offer an interfaith mentorship program similar to its already established academic adviser system and the Cook Leadership Academy out of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. Students can be paired with professors of their discipline and faith, or, if there is no such professor, they can be guided by a professor of their faith outside their discipline. The idea behind having a mentor of the similar interests is that these professionals have seemingly found a way to reconcile their faith and discipline and would therefore be able to offer support and guidance to the struggling student. Some psychologists have noted that, when people understand that others share their beliefs, they feel validated and justified in maintaining those beliefs (Gal, Rucker). Thus, in pairing students with professors who they perceive to hold similar beliefs, the students will rest assured that they can maintain their faith in an academic setting, and they can work with that professor to reconcile the two.

To be clear, the purpose of the mentorship would not be to entrench students in their own views through affirmation. Rather, it would provide students an outlet to discuss their faith and concerns with a person who has likely struggled with and reconciled opposing views. It would not encourage students to be more close-minded; by providing them a mentor of the same faith, they can develop a sense of trust with this mentor, who can work to improve the students' closed-mindedness from the inside out.

The program would not require students to meet with their "advisers" frequently, but it would simply give them the option to do so. Students can also choose to adopt their spiritual adviser as their full-time academic adviser so that professors are not doubled down with advisees. The new program would not favor any particular religion; it would be all-inclusive and

interfaith. Furthermore, professors will not be in any way penalized by fellow faculty members or staff for their affiliations. That is, neither their tenure nor promotion potential will be affected by their participation in this program. As is such, the hiring process at GVSU will not include religious affiliation as an element of the application; the university can request to know faith affiliation following employment.

The university can initially seek participants on a volunteer basis, but if this method does not generate a fair amount of interest, it could offer service credit for participation. Furthermore, this program would not necessarily demand from professors more than they already give. If students simply chose to take these faith-matched professors on as academic advisers, the amount of time spent with these students would not be greatly different than it would be with non-spiritual students.

In offering the program as an equal-opportunity interfaith organization, GVSU would not be giving preference or in any way privileging any particular faith group. Neither would it be imposing any religion on its students. In this regard, separation of church and state would be retained.

If GVSU does not implement this program, then at the very least, professors could offer a disclaimer prior to teaching courses that may provide information conflicting with religious beliefs. This is the method employed by Burns, who reminds students of the difference between believing and understanding. He explains:

> [I]t is possible to understand something and not believe it to be true. Given the power differential at work in the classroom, this distinction can operate as a kind of permission granted by the authority figure (professor) to the student that it is possible to learn without changing beliefs. I assure the class that belief is a personal issue — understanding is a classroom issue.

A simple disclaimer such as this would encourage students to retain classroom material not as accepted truth, but as a different worldview.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

      I have not been a long-term sufferer of cognitive dissonance, but it is my firm belief that students would appreciate and take advantage of a mentor program, if offered. Personally, I have already used the GVSU faculty for spiritual support, and it has been instrumental in my success as a student. According to the UCLA study, students who are provided with more opportunities to "connect with their inner selves" see growth in their academic and leadership skills, have greater intellectual confidence, and are more satisfied with their college experience. I can attest to those results.

      When I initially came to GVSU, I did not push myself. I shied away from science courses because I wanted an easy four years, and I enrolled in the easiest fluff classes that I could find. It wasn't until my complete conversion to my faith and full realization of my life purpose that I resolved to challenge myself academically and push my limits. It was through a Catholic-guided mentality that I took on a dual major in journalism and biomedical sciences and a minor in religious studies. My faith was also behind my decision to accept promotion after promotion at the Lanthorn to eventually take the responsibility of editor-in-chief. It also encouraged me to accept a fellowship position with the Cook Leadership Academy, develop an intercollegiate Catholic mentor program between students and professors, organize a Catholic academic lecture series, and work to be an agent of change in the world. Without the guidance of faith-filled people in my life and their nurturing of my spirit, I am certain that I would not have accomplished any of this.

      Had the university not provided me an academic adviser who was willing to discuss my

career and academics in the context of my faith, I certainly would not have been so successful. The ability to meet with an authority figure and receive validation, rather than scorn, when I say "I feel called to do this" is an immense — yet simple and inexpensive — support.

WHY RELIGION IS IMPORTANT TO DEAL WITH

Religion is not at all an individual matter. It has widespread social consequences and deep tendrils in various sectors of the global community. Therefore, the religious concerns of even a few individuals should be of interest to anyone operating in society, including university officials. This section offers justification for public universities concerning themselves with religious matters.

Because religiosity is prevalent in the world, if academic limitations exist for religious people, then these academic limitations are also prevalent. In working to alleviate the limitations, the country — and the world — could achieve greater potential and push boundaries more efficiently. Religion has inspired countless academics who have greatly contributed to the world's reservoir of knowledge. Without the guidance of religions, certain scientific advancements may not have been made or perhaps would have been discovered later, thus slowing social progress. Judaism produced Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Paul Ehrlich, Edward Teller and Jonas Salk. Catholicism produced Alexander Fleming, Gregor Mendel, Galileo Galilei, Andreas Vesalius and Louis Pasteur. Islam produced Jabir ibn Hayyan, Muhammad ibn Zakariya Razi, Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi and Ibn al-Haytham. Other scientists, philosophers and theorists identified with other world religions. This is not to say that atheists or non-religious people did not contribute to society; it is merely to suggest the prevalence or significance of religion in seemingly secular academic fields. Without the motivation of faith, certain disciplines may not have flourished.

Religion is also a crucial point of conversation because of the amount of contention that it sparks. The promotion in college of more complete understandings of individuals' personal faiths may be a catalyst for large-scale change: namely, world peace. After all, misshapen religions have contributed to much of the violence in the world. Many terrorists justify their destructive acts with scripture verses, and many acts of terrorism are results of misunderstood religious values and beliefs. Malicious or ignorant people spread distorted views of a faith to converts or recruits, who then justify terrorist activity using their warped understanding of their newfound faith. Consider, for example, the Islamic concept of jihad. The word, meaning "holy struggle," was originally a reactive phrase. Muslims were called to defend their faith and their people when an attack was initiated against them; they were not to harm innocent people (Al-Saidat, Al-Khawalda). However, some contemporary Muslims have killed passersby and unarmed civilians under the guise of jihad. The clarification of the meaning of jihad during the terrorists' formative years might have prevented their recruitment to terrorist groups and could have possibly saved the lives of their current victims. Islam is not the only contemporary religion that fosters dangerously uninformed believers. In the U.S., the Westboro Baptist Church, thriving branches of the Ku Klux Klan and certain white supremacy groups use Christianity to justify their prejudiced acts of violence or hate. These extremist groups have distorted views of Christianity by singling out specific biblical verses to support their prejudices. Prevention of religious distortion could eliminate the ignorance that allows people to use religion for harm. Understanding of one's own faith could therefore lead to world peace.

A final claim to the value of spiritual support is the service that it would do to a public university. Religion would improve the liberal arts experience by encouraging more diverse views in and out of the classroom and fostering thoughtful dialogue about disciplines in a more meaningful context. Academia is strongly focused on analytical, deconstructionist approaches to

education; it focuses on tearing the world to pieces to better understand it. Meanwhile, religions strive to construct a comprehensive view of the world to come closer to an accurate understanding of Truth. Promoting pursuit of religion would encourage students to piece together their knowledge from different disciplines to construct a complete view of the world. Mooney quotes other studies as she asserts that spirituality and religion can maintain the traditions and values of a liberal arts education in their focus on a search for meaning.

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