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The Long-Haul: Buddhist Educational Strategies to Strengthen Students' Resilience for Lifelong Personal Transformation and Positive Community Change

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Abstract

For decades, community engagement scholars have built a robust body of knowledge that explores multiple facets of the higher education community engagement domain. More recently, scholars and practitioners from mainly Christian affiliated faith-based institutions have begun to investigate the complex inner world of community-engaged students' meaning-making and spiritual development. While most of this fascinating cross-domain effort has been primarily based on "Western" influenced Judeo-Christian traditions, this study explores service-learning/community engagement themes, approaches, rationale, and strategies from an "Eastern" perspective based on the rich tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. This case study research focuses on curricular approaches, influences, and impacts of Buddhist philosophy/spirituality on community engagement endeavors in the context of Maitripa College, an urban graduate higher education institution located in Portland, OR. Researchers corroborate key findings from previous faith-based institutional studies as well as extend the literature in two specific areas: 1) providing strategies for and discussing the role of spiritual formation and development in relation to community engagement; and 2) the Buddhist view of seeing obstacles as opportunities (Thubten Zopa Rinpoche & 'jig-Med-Bstan-Pa'i-Ñi-Ma, Rdo Grub-Chen III, 2001) as a way to increase effectiveness and harmony in all aspects of life, including academic service-learning endeavors.

Keywords: service-learning, Buddhist, faith-based, spiritual, formation, community engagement, urban

Over the past decades, community engagement scholars have built a robust body of knowledge that explores ways in which engagement with community, writ large, impacts various key stakeholders, including students, community members and organizations, faculty, institutions, and academic departments (Clayton et al., 2013; Furco & Billig, 2002; Holland et al., 2001; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kecskes, 2015). Concomitantly, community engagement scholar-practitioners have creatively developed, tested, and disseminated an equally impressive set of strategies to increase pedagogical and community development outcomes (Stoecker et al., 2009; Longo, 2007; Zlotkowski & Saltmarsh, 2011). Much of this important work has focused on augmenting foundational skills, attitudes, and behaviors associated with democratic or civic principles (Johnson, 2017; Ehrlich, 2000). However, until a decade ago, the inner world of community-engaged students' spiritual development was significantly underrepresented in the literature. More recently, due in large part to Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI's) landmark, longitudinal study (Astin et al., 2011), scholars, especially those from faith-based institutions, have begun to explore the complex world of students' spiritual meaning-making (Ackerman et al., 2010; Dirksen, 2020; Kozlowski et al., 2014). Welch and Koth (2013) specifically connect the domains of service-learning and students' inner development with their highly useful metatheory of spiritual formation. While most of this fascinating cross-domain effort has been largely based on "Western" influenced Judeo-Christian traditions, this study explores similar themes, approaches, rationale, and strategies from an "Eastern" perspective based on the rich tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Judeo-Christian associated institutions have dominated the private higher education landscape since the founding of the country. However, American society remains open to multiple faith-based educational traditions today. In fact, in recent years, a great deal of work has been done in the realm of the interfaith movement in education, especially by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a national organization founded in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States. IFYC is dedicated to interfaith education as part of the college experience, and, ultimately, interfaith cooperation as "a positive force in our society" (Interfaith Youth Core, 2017, Mission section, para.1). Simultaneously with this more visible appearance, approximately a dozen Buddhist-affiliated colleges have entered the higher education milieu. Among them is Maitripa College, a small Tibetan Buddhist graduate school offering masters' degrees in Buddhist studies and divinity. The college is a non-residential, urban institution, located in the inner-southeast neighborhood of Portland, OR, a mid-sized city in the Pacific Northwest. Maitripa College was established in 2006 on the basis of the aspiration to educate students through the framework, or "pillars," of rigorous scholarship, reflective meditation, and active service in the world. Exploring the formation and interconnection between these three pillars and their impact on students, in the context of Portland's urban environment, provides the inspiration for this study.

Since the 1980s, higher education community engagement scholars have investigated the need and outlined strategies to adequately prepare students for appropriate community interaction (Boyer, 1987; Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014; Karasik, 2019). Most academic service-learning/community engagement strategies include some type of orientation to the community or to the hosting community-based organization, often including in-class or in-community visits with key neighborhood or organizational leaders as part of preparation for more active engagement, or service. If the community-engaged work is technically oriented, pre-service strategies may include specialized training in a necessary domain or activity, such as canvassing or phone-banking practice, or perhaps web design, data analysis training, language acquisition, and so forth (Kecskes et al., 2016; Long et al., 2006). The need for establishing and enacting some type of pre-service orientation or training for students, and more broadly for all participants, before community engagement activities commence is well established in the literature.

While some scholars demonstrate the power of students taking charge of their own learning in the community engagement process (Diambra & McClam, 2001; Van Der Ryn, 2007), the literature speaks less to the imperative of developing students' emotional or behavioral maturity for sustained community-engaged work. Scholars have begun to explicate the ties between faith, service, and social justice (Dalton, 2007) and the impacts of religious beliefs on civic engagement activities (Kozlowski et al., 2014), however, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the proposition of designing integrated curricula to intentionally develop students' personal-spiritual formation in the context of Buddhist higher education community engagement. Indeed, our study did not start with that end in mind, either. Rather, our intent was to do an exploratory study using a case study methodology (Mills et al., 2012) to explore why and how a Buddhist higher education institution in North America implements academic service-learning programs for students. After briefly discussing the literature on faith-based institutions and service-learning, we will present an overview of Maitripa College's curricular approach and underlying rationale, our study design, results and limitations, and a discussion and presentation of potential implications of this work for higher education scholars, curriculum designers, and practitioners, especially those in urban settings. The city block-long series of physical buildings that comprise Maitripa College are located at the interface of a light industrial zone with a bustling, independent small business and diverse residential area in inner southeast Portland. The internal environment of the College, however, with its ambiance of quiet and respectful activity more akin to a monastery than a traditional college campus, is juxtaposed with the busy streets just outside its doors.

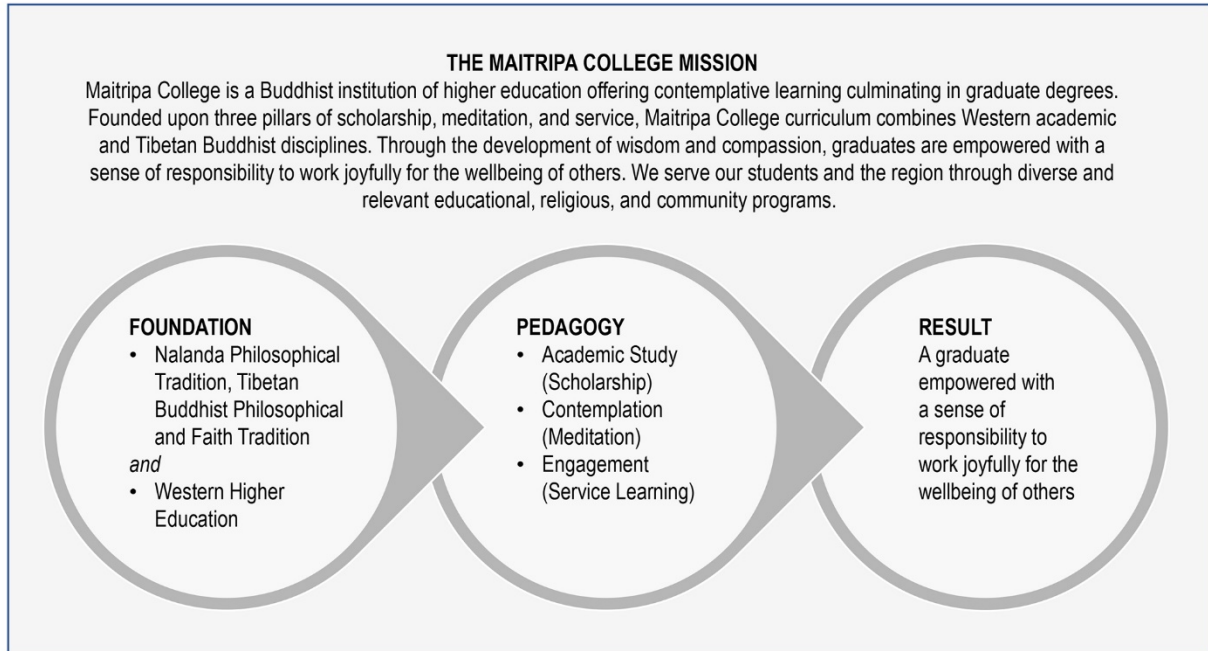
Faith-based Institutions and Service learning

Given the hallowed history of the nexus between clergy education in the Americas and the founding of the earliest higher education institutions in the United States (Veysey, 1981), it should not be surprising that today's faith-based institutions continue to provide opportunities for students to explore religion, faith, and service within the context of their unique educational environments and worldviews. Many institutions of higher education were, in fact, originally founded upon a faith-based mission in order to propagate that faith, and although that is not necessarily the case in contemporary times, it does follow that faith-based higher education, like all forms of education in our world today, is seeking relevance in an increasingly secularized society (Aadland & Skjørshammer, 2012). Daniels et al. (2016) point to the particular role that faith-based institutions have in the lives of their students and in the contemporary world, often rooted in the very foundations of their missions, in promoting the public good through service. Other authors (Ackerman et al., 2010; Welch & Koth, 2013; Roso, 2019) speak to specific ways in which service/community engagement can be operationalized through service-learning to bring about spiritual maturity in students, and some authors (Smith, 1996; Schaffer, 2004) cite an emphasis on the "spiritual development" of students as a distinct characteristic of religious (in these reviewed cases, Christian) institutions of higher education. Notwithstanding the fact that Schaffer's (2004) study includes only Christian affiliated institutions, he suggests that the integration of service and learning is "naturally fostered" in faith-based colleges and universities. Schaffer notes that service-learning, in fact, furthers the educational, faith-based missions of these institutions; respondents in his study reported overwhelmingly that "service-learning can be used as a tool for integrating faith and learning" (Schaffer, 2004, p.136).

Each of these aspects point to themes that arose as elements for consideration in our study, directly or indirectly, and will be explored in this treatment, especially: (a) the particular role of faith-based institutions in furthering the public good; (b) the emphasis of the spiritual development of the student as part of an education in a faith-based institution; and (c) the integration of service and learning as a pedagogical method.

Context of Maitripa College

Figure 1. The Maitripa College mission statement and curriculum are indicative of its unique learning environment:



The Maitripa College curriculum was constructed with the intentional objective of producing graduates that view service/community engagement as a natural extension of their spirituality. The assumption that being of service to others should be grounded in a process of spiritual formation significantly informs this curricular approach. Therefore, the Maitripa College curriculum is designed to shepherd the student through the study and deep development of their faith using contemplative pedagogy framed around first person experience (Simmer-Brown, 2019). This approach guides the student through a process of learning to bring their faith to life through active service. Through their educational journey, the intention is for students to become not only informed individuals empowered and prepared to work in service with communities, but also equipped with readily accessible internal resources necessary to sustain themselves throughout the day, and throughout life or, for Buddhists, for the very long-haul of equipping oneself for lifetimes. For the founders and faculty of Maitripa College, this is both a spiritual matter of insight as well as a practical matter of resiliency. Engaging others harmoniously with equanimity, especially in a complex, major North American urban environment like the Portland Metropolitan area, requires training and practice—these key assumptions undergird the Maitripa College curriculum.

Education Informed by Buddhism

As one of only a few Buddhist institutions of higher education in the United States, Maitripa College has taken inspiration from many sources. Rooted historically in the Nalanda tradition of Indian Buddhist scholarship, directly informed by the living example of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet and other well-established Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders, and inspired practically by the rigor of the contemporary academy of the West, Maitripa College stands at the intersection of diverse traditions. The college has drawn carefully from each complimentary domain and constructed its educational model in like manner. In particular, the framing of service as a key element of Buddhist education and of a life rooted in faith reflects the propensity in some forms of Buddhism to incorporate social justice as part of the lived tradition of the faith. In the United States, in particular, the term “(Socially) Engaged Buddhism,” coined by the Vietnamese Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh, refers to the elements of the Buddhist tradition that seek to apply the understandings gleaned from (a) meditative practice and (b) the discernment of the world based on the Buddhist worldview to salient social, political, environmental, and economic challenges and injustices (Hanh, 2017). The Maitripa College curriculum embraces this approach and worldview.

Additionally, three key assumptions inform the Buddhist philosophy, education, and formation approaches evident at Maitripa College. First, not unlike other spiritual traditions, spiritual formation is viewed as an excellent foundation for a life of service in the world (*The Making of a Jesuit* - IgnatianSpirituality.com, 2009). Second, an advanced component of the Buddhist tradition is the practice of taking obstacles into the path (Thubten Zopa Rinpoche & 'jig-Med-Bstan-Pa'i-Ñi-Ma, Rdo Grub-Chen III, 2001). This daily practice refers to the development of a sort of mental dexterity within the individual Buddhist practitioner that, over time, allows them to interpret the difficult things that arise in life as obstacles to be embraced on the spiritual path. Indeed, rather than responding to life's challenges with aversion and/or a strong sense of injustice or self-pity, Buddhist practitioners are trained to utilize these experiences as opportunities to deepen one's personal resilience, formation, commitment, resolve, and compassion for others. In the results sections later in this presentation, readers will see subjects' responses that demonstrate the active presence of this foundational perspective in students' and alumni worldviews. Third, Buddhists assume both pragmatic and hopeful views towards challenges and afflictions extant in the world; texts associated with the life and teachings of the historical Buddha utilize the word “suffering” when discussing life's challenges. Indeed, suffering is the key subject matter of one of the Buddha's best recognized teachings: the Four Noble Truths (Gyatso, 1998). In short, the Buddhist perspective on this subject is pragmatic because of the recognition that suffering is present and pervasive in the world. This perspective is equally hopeful because of the belief that suffering can be transformed, even eradicated, at the individual and eventually at the universal level.

The elimination of suffering, and the subsequent personal freedom it provides, informs adherents' approach to engaging with, or serving others. For Buddhists, the highest spiritual goal is to help every living being transcend all forms of suffering (Gyatso, 1998). Therefore, from a Buddhist perspective, individuals are highly motivated to work in service to and with others in order to eliminate suffering in the world. This effort is carried out on the basis of faith that suffering can and must be transformed in order for individuals, and all beings, to become fully free. This freedom from suffering and its causes is generally referred to as "enlightenment" (Gyatso, 1998). Although there are many arguments that attempt to delineate the boundaries of liberation in terms of the individual versus the greater good, there is agreement in all forms of Buddhism that suffering can and should be eliminated. These three key assumptions are important as they represent a set of foundational understandings upon which all Buddhist philosophy and education approaches depend. Thus, for Buddhist students and teachers alike, developing one's ability to embrace all forms of suffering in the world and to enthusiastically work to overcome it by eliminating its causes directly informs the rationale for the inclusion of service as a curricular priority at Maitripa College.

Pedagogical Model Connects Faith and Service

The Maitripa College curricular approach encompasses a pedagogical model that relies on three levels of interaction with the subject matter: philosophical doctrine, meditation, and service.

The foundation of Buddhist Studies in the context of graduate study at Maitripa College is the philosophical doctrine of the tradition. This tradition is associated with the Indian dialectical approaches of Nalanda University in India, which functioned as an important seat of learning in Asia from the 5th-13th century (*Oldest university on earth is reborn after 800 years*, 2010).

In addition to engaging with traditional academic material that is read, discussed, and key points committed to memory, students at Maitripa also learn Asian and Tibetan history and language. Further, contemporary disciplines related to ways in which Buddhism functions in the modern world, such as classes on compassionate communication, women in Buddhism, race and Buddhism, and so forth, are also integrated. This first level of learning corresponds to "foundational knowledge" in Fink's (2013) modern learning taxonomy and to the first level, "knowledge," in the esteemed educational taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom (1979).

The second level of interaction with the curriculum is based on contemplative practices, or meditation. At this level, faculty at Maitripa College seek to deepen the educational approach by focusing more on an integrated level of learning in the mind of the student. Animating the meditation pillar, students are guided through the material with the use of a contemplative lens, through introspection and reflection. The dynamics of a contemplative approach to learning have a long and deep history in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Dreyfus, 2003). This level of learning

does not have a commonly known historical correlate in mainstream modern Western higher education, although contemplative education is an evolving field in the United States today (Morgan, 2014).

The third level of learning embodied in the Maitripa College curricular structure is embodied in the service pillar, or area of study. The service pillar at Maitripa College has, from its founding, held a place of significance in the curriculum, with approximately 20% of required credits for a graduate degree at Maitripa College fulfilled through the service pillar. The Maitripa College service curriculum focuses the first year on developing the students' internal, or personal, capacity to serve and lead. In year one, these internal capacities are developed primarily via service within the college community, primarily at Maitripa College itself. In the second year of study, students' external service capacity is intentionally developed in more traditional, community-based placements in the Portland Metropolitan region. This service rationale is depicted in the Maitripa College materials as follows:

The service pillar is where the “rubber meets the road” within the Maitripa College education. Exploring relationships outside of College grounds, students are paired with a community partner with whom they dedicate their time and effort in service. Working in hospice, in prisons, at schools, with the homeless community, in interfaith environments, or in any number of other volunteer capacities in and around Portland, students are guided to develop personal spiritual formation as a basis from which to take their study and practice off the cushion and into the world to benefit others. (*Make Your Practice Your Life ~ The Three Pillars*, 2019)

Study Design

Research Methodology

Seeking to understand students' experiences of serving with communities as part of a Buddhist graduate degree program is a unique undertaking. Dynamics of such an endeavor that were of greatest consequence to the researchers were the elements of investigating their experiences in the context of their role as students of Buddhism. According to Yin (2014), case study research design is an appropriate research methodology to use when the context in which the phenomena exists is relevant to the phenomena being researched. An exploratory research design is most appropriate when there is no pre-determined outcome for the research, and when there is no hypothesis to be tested (Mills et al., 2012).

In terms of this exploratory study, the context is the Buddhist education of the research subjects, and based on the research question and the frame of the study, is a most relevant consideration. Thus, in this case, in addition to the literature and documentary review, human subjects' approval was obtained and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and

transcribed for the data collection phase. The study was comprised of three cases, the experiences of two Maitripa College graduate degree alumni (one with experience doing extensive work in homeless shelters and soup kitchens and the other with significant engagement experience in both maximum and minimum security prisons) and one current second year Master of Divinity student (whose current community engagement/service effort is in an area hospital).

Research Questions, Interview Protocol, and Participants

Maitripa College counts learning through service/community engagement as one of its three primary pedagogical methodologies. Assessment of traditional scholarship is easily accomplished through readily available evaluation strategies, and Maitripa uses both quantitative and qualitative evaluation tools to ascertain academic learning achievement, but the assessment of less traditional pedagogies, such as the meditation and service curricular aspects at Maitripa College, pose unique challenges that are beyond the scope of this current effort. However, an intention to begin to establish and record the impact of the service-learning curriculum at Maitripa College on students, community partners, and stakeholders, in alignment with the literature of the field (Gelmon et al., 2018), led to the development of the following research questions: (1) How does faith influence, shape, and inform community engagement through the service-learning curriculum at Maitripa College?; and how does service/community engagement inform faith and spiritual development in Maitripa College students?

Through the use of a semi-structured interview protocol, the researchers began by asking background questions in order to gain basic information from each participant. Following this introduction, participants were asked a series of questions relating to:

- (1) their personal definitions of “faith” and “service”;
- (2) their understanding of the mission of Maitripa College and how faith informs this mission;
- (3) the place of interfaith initiatives in their education; and,
- (4) the urban nature of the educational environment.

Data Analysis

After discussions about and strategies formulated to attempt to mitigate the impact of interviewers’ positionality on respondents, interviews were conducted with both researchers present at all times. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by a third party. Complete transcripts were coded independently by the individual researchers. The researchers then met to determine emergent themes in the data; in this way, investigators were attentive to maintaining the validity of the research through ensuring interrater reliability (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Upon conclusion of this process, four metathemes materialized. The researchers engaged in respondent/member checking with each research participant based on the emergent metathemes which now form the basis of the data analysis herein.

Results

The results of this study demonstrated a strong relationship between students’ education and faith development, with special focus on the integrative function of the service/community engagement aspect of the curriculum. Four metathemes that emerged from the data:

- (1) Service functions as a point of integration for students’ faith and faith-based education into their lives;
- (2) Service experience impacts students’ faith and spiritual formation;
- (3) The urban environment is an important container for such; and
- (4) Obstacles or barriers students encountered while engaging with community were viewed as opportunities for learning and growth.

See Table 1 for the themes and associated quotes that emerged from the data.

Table 1. Themes and Narrative Data

Theme	Quotations from Subjects
Service functions as a point of integration for students’ faith and faith-based education into their lives	<p>“My faith ...supports and drives how I engage with the world and why I engage with the world in the way I do...It's kind of all integrated.”</p>
Service impacts faith and spiritual formation	<p>“My work and my practice can become indistinguishable. They’re the same to me...learning that part of being a Mahayana Buddhist is service, is helping others... I don’t distinguish the two, to me they’re the same.”</p>
Service impacts faith and spiritual formation	<p>“Just having the desire to benefit others woven into everything we do here is really amazing and makes it all feel a lot more relevant and a lot more—kind of—urgent. Others really need to be benefited. There's a lot to do... that's a big part of what we learn here....”</p> <p>“...And that (the service-learning) was again, like the missing piece. The piece I was missing, to help me see the craziness of my own mind, and to have more love and kindness...”</p>
Service impacts faith and spiritual formation	<p>“...meditation, working with the mind, retraining it, the view of the mind, karma,</p>

The urban environment is an important container for learning

all of these aspects that interrelate to support all the other parts. They kind of all work together... It becomes pretty clear when you reflect back on how you changed over time....” And finally, “I think that here is a big part of that and it’s an ongoing process of just self-acceptance, self-love, kind of letting go of that self-critic... that practice component in conjunction with working with people in the jail, and the prison, and hospice, and CPE, all of that has been huge... it’s action, reflection, action, reflection, action, just going in this constant loop and keep refining and sharing and growing, and accepting that it’s okay. I’m a process and it’s a good process.

“[T]he urban setting... has a potential for more diversity and I think that’s important.” Another responded, “[B]eing in a city gives you lots more opportunity to practice than... if you were at a monastery.” Connecting to this sub-theme, yet another interviewee mentioned “[P]eople used to come to Kopan (a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery located in the Kathmandu, Nepal valley), and they say this place is so wonderful. How do you practice (here)? And we would all laugh, and we’d say, ‘Well, you go to India because India gives you lots of opportunities to practice.’ Being in a city gives you lots more opportunity to practice than you would be if you were at a monastery or out at some calm place.”

“I think that for service, being in an urban environment is really rich with opportunities because there are so many ways to serve in a city. Also, I think probably the kids where I’m serving right now come from all over the place and that’s because we’re in an urban center. So finding a place like that I’m guessing wouldn’t be as likely in Estacada.”

Viewing life's challenges and obstacles as opportunities. (Obstacles or barriers that students encountered while engaging with community were viewed as opportunities for learning and growth).

“[I]f I’m stuck in traffic and the light is going to turn but then everybody is going so slow and the light turns green, and then it turns yellow and then red and I have to wait for three cycles, then I’ll think ‘somebody else in this is waiting for this light, has to get home or to their kids or to sick relatives or some more important reason than me’, and so then instead of thinking about my own self and how I want to get home I’ll think about them and I just pray that they get there when they need to and I’ll think ‘may they get home quickly, may they have what they need’ and then I feel better. And hopefully they get home.”

“I do practice a lot, and in the car, stuck in traffic...love and kindness practice...it's such a good time because you get so mad and you have all these horrible feelings when you're driving and (you think) ‘these people are in my way,’ ‘why is everyone driving so slow?’, ‘everyone is bothering me,’ ‘I hate all the people’. But then you can work with that, and that's really helpful. I find it really helpful.”

“All the things that felt like barriers... at first especially I would bump up against my ego and all my neuroses and feeling awkward...it felt like an obstacle at the time but it was just part of how I could learn and develop my practice, so it was really fine.”

“It's all supportive, even the obstacles or challenges. They're part of what makes it work.”

Service Functions as a Point of Integration

This theme emerged from each interview. Respondents discussed the Maitripa College service curriculum and fieldwork in terms of being a point of integration at which the principles of Buddhist doctrine and guidelines for conduct were readily applied and more deeply understood in practice. In particular, students spoke about how their faith, as they were exploring it in the Maitripa College curriculum and in their lives, was a motivating and influential factor for how they engaged in the world. In particular, all subjects discussed how their faith and faith development provides an important point of integration between their study, practice, and the ways in which they interact with the external environment.

Service Impacts Faith and Spiritual Formation

This theme emerged from each interview. All respondents discussed the impact of learning, internalizing, and serving from the perspective of their faith as an experience that was deepened by their service-learning experiences at Maitripa College. For aspiring Buddhist students, there is an explicit recognition of the central role of one's mind/mental framework in the development of one's practice, especially the daily practice of living and positively functioning in the external environment of the world. Further, for Buddhists, there is an embedded faith-inspired orientation toward cherishing, or serving, others as a way to (a) help alleviate others' suffering as well as to, (b) decrease one's own mental afflictions. Indeed, a basic tenet of Tibetan Buddhist philosophical thought is that human's habitual tendencies to think first of themselves, or of one's individual or personal well-being, is a primary source of individual and global suffering. Therefore, quite practically, it follows that activities that support adherents in serve with others would be a great benefit, for all involved. Thus, when respondents discuss the "urgency" of service or mention how being in service to others helps them see the "craziness of my own mind" in the context of their community-based learning placement they are exploring the acceleration and deepening of their learning about the connection between themselves and all beings in the world. In terms of integration, one older alumnae respondent discussed their "self-acceptance...letting go of the self-critic...that practice component in conjunction with working with people in the jail, and the prison, and hospice...has been huge." From a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, recognizing and internalizing the fact that the outer world is intimately connected to individual interpretations in each person's inner world is a core (life) learning objective. Therefore, integrating the outer world of appearances with the inner world of experiences, in an ongoing and reflective manner, is critically important for both faith and social development. One respondent summed up her experiences of that integration by saying "...it's action, reflection, action, reflection, action, just going in this constant loop and keep refining and sharing and growing, and accepting that it's ok." All respondents spoke to the fact that actively engaging in service as part of their faith-based learning experience helped them to further develop the wish to be of benefit to others, thus simultaneously deepening their faith while informing their community actions.

The Urban Environment

This theme emerged from each interview. All students spoke of the effect of living, studying, and engaging in service in an urban environment. Diversity and opportunity for enhanced and accelerated learning emerged as sub-themes. To better understand the potential impacts of an urban environment on traditional Buddhist education and formation one need not look much further than the many readily-available images of Buddhist monasteries on the web. In Tibet, these centers of scholarship and meditative practice were traditionally situated in the isolated mountainsides of the Himalayas. In contemporary Sri Lanka, Thailand, or Vietnam one most often finds monasteries snuggled peacefully on hilltops or other secluded jungle locations that are set apart from the general population. Many who study at Maitripa College have been to one or more of these types of educational institutions in the East; all students know about them, if only from hearing numerous stories about such places from their peers or teachers. Yet, Tibetan Buddhist educational development is dependent on interaction with others as an opportunity to serve and grow and re-train the human habitual tendency to think first, or primarily, about oneself. In this light, the idea of traffic or parking problems, or noise, or prison populations, houseless individuals, or the hungry all provide promising opportunities to practice patience, kindness and general caring for all being as a primary focus of our day-to-day activities. Caring for others becomes the primary venue to develop and express one's faith. Where there are more beings, as is the case of urban environments, then the sheer volume of access increases the student's abilities to practice and develop and express their faith. Lastly, we see connections between this theme of the urban nature of Maitripa's location in Portland, OR to the final theme of learning how to re-frame life's challenge.

Life's Challenges and Obstacles as Opportunities

This theme emerged from each interview. A basis for this is the practice of thought transformation, a well-known philosophical orientation that is presented in traditional Buddhism philosophy (Gyatso, 1998). Given this, all interviewees spoke of strategies that they personally use to increase agility: questioning, challenging, and sometimes changing their perceptions of their experiences. This continual re-framing activity allowed them to question their interpretations of these barriers, in service and in their lives, and provided regular opportunities for them to view them differently. One more mundane example provided was the experience of driving a car in traffic. The respondent described, with significant detail, their internal work to transform their thinking from an egocentric, self-centered attitude to one focused on the well-being of others. In their case, the "others" were those who got through the traffic light before them.

Discussion

At Maitripa College, each student engages with an extensive community engagement preparation program before the inception of their service experiences. Respondents commented that Maitripa College's intentional approach focused on the personal (spiritual) formation of the student was, at times, frustrating, especially in the first year of study. In part because they viewed the service aspect of the curriculum most enthusiastically when originally applying for the program yet found out once formal study began that, in the initial year, students' engagement activities are focused internally on the Maitripa College community exclusively. One respondent remarked, "So there are classes called Community Service, like 301 or whatever...there is a service component to the class, but a lot of it is studying communication...about different aspects of being in service. Which turn out to be just helpful, in the service. But at the time I was kind of like 'get to the service part!'"

Students were forced to slow down and begin with internal engagement, beginning with the self, engaging with and eventually learning how to begin to transform one's mind as a foundation for properly understanding all of life's activities. Building from there, first-year students were incrementally introduced to smaller service projects whose focus was primarily the deepening of their understanding of the nature of reality (known in Buddhist studies as "wisdom") as a necessary precursor to external community engagement/service, which in the Buddhist lexicon is referred to as "compassion" or "compassionate action."

Without exception, however, respondents discussed how in the second year of study (and in subsequent years since graduation for alumni interviewees) they felt a sense of calm strength that brought greater perspective, meaning, patience, and a sense of perseverance to their community engaged work. Respondents discussed their personal resilience in terms of the long-haul. Further, they mentioned how the external service activity in prisons, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and in hospitals of year two informed them about, and increased their appreciation for, the internal service and other spiritual formation activities associated with the first year of curriculum. "Service" in Buddhism is understood as a two-way street: it is both the activity that naturally occurs when wisdom is deepened and made manifest in the world as well as a recursive activity that further deepens one's understanding of the challenging (suffering) nature of sentient beings. This growing "wisdom" is also recursive: awareness of the nature of reality inspires aspiring Buddhists to serve all the more so as to alleviate their own suffering and that of others. As one respondent mentioned, "service—it's kind of urgent!" The community engagement (or service activity in the world) then further informs students' depth of understanding about the nature of reality, or "wisdom." The cycle of service, study, and contemplation then begins anew.

Interestingly, in this case, each time the researchers queried subjects about barriers or challenges they encountered in the workplace or service site, the respondents seemed somewhat puzzled. Indeed, it seemed that each subject had internalized the idea that barriers/challenges are simply

part of life, or in Buddhist terms, pervasive suffering, and therefore not something strange or unexpected. At times, respondents spoke enthusiastically, even humorously, about their own former lack of understanding of this basic point and how they used to view “challenges” negatively, sometimes with impatience or even anger, and how unproductive those thoughts and responses now appear to them. This internalized ability to view all of life’s occurrences as a natural outcome of cause and effect and a natural process of intention and growth was clearly connected to subjects’ sense of responsibility-taking and empowerment to free themselves and all beings, eventually, from the mundane world full of challenges and frustrations most people currently know so well.

Finally, in terms of the urban location of Maitripa College in Portland, OR, respondents spoke in simple terms about the logistical advantages of urban living, including diversity of individual and organizational opportunities to serve and abundant number of people in proximity all of whom provided daily reminders of the suffering of all beings. When queried about the impact of their Buddhist orientation in the service site, none said that it seemed to make much difference. Site supervisors, community partners, and community members, they said, all viewed them as student learners who were present to serve and learn. One wonders if this is a regional phenomenon of the West Coast, given its proximity to the Asian Rim and relatively increased familiarity with Asian spiritual traditions, or whether this is partially due to Portland’s generally progressive citizenry, or even more generally to religious pluralism and freedom that formed part of the original founding of the United States.

Limitations

This is an initial, exploratory study focused on the impact of faith in Buddhist higher education. This research is based on the experiences of three current students and alumni from one institution only, which limits the generalizability of these findings. The next phase of this study will be enhanced by a larger and more diverse sample size, perhaps utilizing a mixed-method research approach and, ideally, by gaining insight by interviewing community partners and additional faculty about their perceptions of the students and of their service activity and outcomes. Also, increasing the sample size to investigate additional Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhist affiliated institutions (i.e., Zen or Theravadin traditions) would enhance overall understanding. The fact that one author of this study is the dean of education at Maitripa College and the other a long-term Buddhist practitioner is a potential advantage as well as a limitation. On one hand, familiarity with the philosophical and practice underpinnings of Buddhist formation allowed the researchers to be attentive to nuanced responses; however, despite researchers’ tight adherence to appropriate case study protocols, close association with the respondents could be seen to have compromised the distillation of several insights, among other limitations.

Implications for Practice and Areas for Future Research

The broader service-learning/community engagement community of scholars and practitioners may find the concept of student formation more intriguing after reading the results of our case study. In particular, the idea of re-framing challenges and barriers endemic to community engagement initiatives into opportunities for growth and learning is particularly promising. More broadly, educators may wish to pay even more attention to students' predispositions towards faith expressions and orientations to community engagement. For some students, having a spiritual practice or belonging to a faith community may be a facilitator for academic service-learning; for others, it may be a barrier; and still for the remainder of students in all types of higher education institutions it may not be an issue or area of awareness. Regardless, when students enter any learning environment, they bring with them the sum-total of all of their previous experiences. Augmenting educator awareness of this powerful fact, as well as increasing the creative application of pedagogical strategies to elicit conversations around students' familiarity and connection to their faith, may lead to deepening respect for the latent power and place of faith traditions in education, and in community engagement initiatives specifically, among all in the learning environment. More broadly, bringing conversations about students' past histories associated with faith, faith-in-action, and/or community engagement/service into the classroom thoughtfully, and earlier into the course and curriculum, may open up new avenues for learning and understanding for all involved, over time. Experimenting with classroom and community-based strategies that intentionally focus on eliciting discussion about students' service/community engagement, as well as their faith backgrounds and experiences, may help students situate their service-learning encounters in the larger context of their faith or former service efforts. Conducting research about the impacts of, and potential challenges associated with, bringing faith-related discussions more formally into the curriculum could inform the field as well as be helpful to practitioners and students. Popular service-learning courses with multiple sections featuring standardized curriculum across sections might be venue for this type of experimentation and research.

The researchers also see ample opportunity for future research in the area of faith-based service-learning in association with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning theory focuses on specific learning experiences that result in profound changes in adult learners. In particular, Mezirow's discussions of the construction and deconstruction of "meaning-making structures" and the strong reliance on reflective techniques as part of the learning process would be interesting and potentially insightful to apply to an analysis of faith-based service-learning. In particular, the assertion that transformative learning occurs when our frames of reference, defined as our assumptions and worldviews composed of habits of mind and resulting points of view, shift seems a rich topic for further research and development. An introduction to a service environment that challenges a student's existing worldview could potentially function as the first step of ten according to transformative learning theory (in Mezirow's terminology, a "disorienting dilemma") and a carefully constructed reflective process

rooted in and in combination with a faith-based curriculum could demonstrate real change in accordance with this model.

Conclusion

To conclude this research, we return to the metathemes uncovered in the study: (1) service functions as a point of integration for students' faith and faith-based education into their lives; (2) the urban environment provides diverse opportunities and is therefore an important container for such; (3) service experience positively develops students' faith and spiritual formation; and (4) obstacles or barriers students encountered while engaging with community were viewed as opportunities for learning and growth.

In particular, our study of the Tibetan Buddhist affiliated Maitripa College corroborates two key findings extant in the literature that emerge from predominantly Christian associated colleges and universities: (1) Faith-based institutions have distinctive opportunities to ensure the fulfillment of their unique missions which generally embody aspirations to both serve the public good and educate the individual through religious education; and, (2) this study also demonstrates the power and promise of service-learning pedagogy for non-Christian associated institutions to accomplish similar ends.

The study of Maitripa College's philosophical underpinnings and curricular approach also extends the literature on faith-based institutions' relation to community engagement in two additional areas: (1) "Barriers and obstacles" encountered by participants when engaging in service with community may be re-framed or transformed into opportunities for deeper learning; and, (2) focusing students' "service" activities for an extended period of time (for the entire first year of graduate school, in the case of Maitripa College) on internal spiritual formation bears further consideration. Indeed, alumni interviewees from Maitripa exuded a deep sense of purpose, calm, and resilience in their current community engaged work, they appear well-equipped for the long-haul of lifelong personal growth and service in community.

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