Spiritual Life and Campus Ministry Program Review

Executive Summary

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Program Review Goals and Process

During this, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, it seems fitting that Wartburg College’s Spiritual Life and Campus Ministry (SLCM) program would undertake a program review. The last program review was more than 10 years ago, and the call to re-examine SLCM is simply this: to understand how God is at work on campus and gauge how effectively Wartburg and SLCM are partnering with God.

The guiding team for the program review used recent research data, interviews, focus groups of students, faculty and staff, and online surveys of the current campus community. There were 32 focus group participants, two individual interviews, and 299 survey responses.

The purpose of this research was to understand the religious climate on campus, gather data about the effectiveness of SLCM, and generate suggestions for ways SLCM can better support the religious mission and identity of the college.

Strengths

1. There is great passion about the religious identity of the college. Respondents of all faith backgrounds (and none) consistently reported that our religious identity is “what makes Wartburg, Wartburg.”
2. Students identify classes as important sources of spiritual meaning.
3. Relationships with faith mentors (faculty, staff, campus pastors) are vitally important to the spiritual lives of students, and enriching to the mentors as well.
4. Those who attend on-campus worship and/or engage in personal spiritual practices find Wartburg to be a spiritually nurturing community.

Challenges

1. Despite the passion for our religious identity we struggle to connect it with our mission. We know what we do (service, justice, vocation, etc.) but not always why we do it (how it is connected to our religious identity).
2. There is need for more discussion about what the college’s Lutheran-Christian identity means in a pluralistic world. How can we have a Christian faith identity yet claim to be...

“I don't think Wartburg would be Wartburg without its Christian background and I don't know if I would have had the same experience I’ve had in my four years without it.”
– Wartburg student

Further information about the survey model can be found in the longer version of this report. Independent variables in our model included: Personal spiritual practices, classes, participation in on-campus worship, influence by campus pastors, area of study. Dependent variables included: Thinking more about faith/sense of meaning since coming to Wartburg, SLCM has nurtured my faith/sense of meaning, reflecting on faith/sense of meaning is an integral part of the Wartburg experience, SLCM is not just for Lutherans, Wartburg should challenge my faith/sense of meaning, Wartburg’s faith affiliation positively affected my decision to enroll or work here.)
welcoming to all faiths? How can our faith identity be an asset in recruitment and retention?

3. Because students are less certain about their religious identities, they are less likely to seek out SLCM events.

4. Classes are significant sources of spiritual meaning, but some students were critical of RE 101.

5. Faculty, staff, and students report an atmosphere of stress and “busyness” on campus that inhibits time for reflection and spiritual growth.

6. Some current Wartburg community members have the perception that faith is unintentionally compartmentalized from the rest of campus life.

Adaptive Challenges

We (Wartburg) can do a better job connecting our identity as a Lutheran-Christian college to our mission (leadership, service, faith, learning). Few people are equipped to make these connections on their own. This leads to uncertainty and ambivalence toward the religious identity of the institution.

Spiritual Life and Campus Ministry is unclear about its purpose and is organized for a bygone era.

One might reasonably ask why it is necessary to connect our religious identity to our mission. If the mission is being lived out, does the motivation matter? There are numerous reasons we believe it is important to make this connection.

1. It makes us unique: many schools are talking about service, passion, purpose, etc. What makes us unique is that we’ve been doing this for 165 years because of our Lutheran identity.

2. Use it or lose it: Schools who don’t make these connections eventually lose their religious identity. The data on this is irrefutable. Institutions that don’t talk about their religious identity eventually see no need for it.²

3. The eternal importance of our mission: The spiritual nature of our identity makes our mission about more than just what we do today. It connects us to the many generations that have gone before us, and reminds us that the work we do today has eternal importance.

4. We are called: Christianity is often defined by the loudest and most exclusive voices. We are called to speak up for a more gracious and inclusive expression of the faith.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The key findings of our study, supported by the data, have led the guiding team to these corresponding recommendations:

1. SLCM, the President’s cabinet, and the Board of Regents could work together to better articulate the connection between our religious identity and mission. Further collaboration will then be needed to discern how best to communicate and embody these commitments as an institution. **The guiding team recommends we begin this process before proceeding to the SLCM specific recommendations.** Some potential strategies for addressing this need include:
   - Working with Marketing & Communication, Admissions, and other external-facing departments to draft a theological identity statement to support our mission statement. Lutheran isn’t just a label. It’s an adjective that describes our way of life and impacts the whole community by shaping the environment.
   - Leading collaborative conversations with divisions/departments that connect their work to the college’s religious identity.

2. SLCM should collaborate with the President’s cabinet and Board of Regents to discuss the ways in which Wartburg’s religious identity and mission are embodied and valued. Some possible questions include:
   - How important is Chapel to the religious identity and mission of the college? If it is important, how do we communicate its value to the Wartburg campus community?
   - Could we better embody our religious identity by curtailing Sunday morning events? What other important markers of our identity need to be highlighted?
   - How might faith have a voice at the table in high-level decision making? Could the Dean of the Chapel be a full or ex-officio member of the cabinet, as is the case at many of our sister institutions?

3. SLCM operated as a de facto congregation at a time when most students came from similar religious and cultural backgrounds. We now find ourselves in a new time in which students are less likely to seek out SLCM. **The most effective way of connecting with students, faculty, and staff seems to be through integration in the curriculum and campus partnerships.** Some potential strategies include:

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“Wartburg’s religious identity is an anchor. I think whether you're Lutheran or not, you hear us all talk about it. I suppose you could have the same mission statement and a similar feeling surrounding the identity. But I think that our identity provides a sort of a hardwiring to something that's a bit more concrete and has been thought about for centuries, and has been articulated, and that you can go back and draw upon. That just gives it a depth that I think would disappear over time, if it weren't there.”

-Wartburg staff member
- Redirecting some SLCM resources from worship to new ministry experiments based on the needs of students, faculty, and staff.
- Explore deeper integrations with the academic curriculum.
- Seeking creative ways to partner with other offices to embed part-time SLCM staff throughout campus. This may mean restructuring staffing to include more part-time positions that work in other offices as well as SLCM.
- SLCM could also embrace partnerships with off-campus churches and ministries when they are consistent with the college’s mission.
- Engaging the community in conversations about God, faith, and meaning is an important need that SLCM could do a better job initiating.

“I think just having the opportunity to have a campus pastor in a classroom setting is really beneficial and allows you to build relationships with them. They always have good instincts about when to reach out.”

— Wartburg student

Wartburg does a better job than most ELCA colleges and universities in lifting up its identity as a Lutheran college. The challenge is that fewer people understand what this means. Wartburg has an opportunity to be a leader in connecting our religious identity and mission. SLCM also has an opportunity to help the community cultivate the vocabulary and atmosphere to talk about their own faith and spiritual identities.