

New study explores diversity, justice among seminary faculty and students from spiritual formation view

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There is growing empirical research that sheds light on healthy spiritual formation capacities among seminary faculty and students committed to diversity and justice. We believe this research offers new angles and strategies within theological education for integrating diversity and justice with growth in spiritual formation for both students and faculty. Faith leaders can help their communities constructively engage diversity and social justice, and this involves key aspects of their own spiritual formation.

Seminary faculty formation, diversity, and justice

Our [Danielsen Institute](#) research team at Boston University recently published a [study](#) on formation factors associated with diversity and justice commitments among about 300 faculty from ATS schools. The study was part of a larger [research project](#) that focused on the assessment of spiritual and moral formation among 18 collaborating seminaries. While most of the research in this 2021 study involved seminary students, we invited a random selection of faculty from the full set of ATS schools to complete a series of questionnaires previously validated in other research. This included self-reported



measurements of their (a) commitment to social justice (e.g., equality for persons of color, women, or immigrants; concerns about poverty), (b) commitment to growth in intercultural competence, (c) respect for persons of other religious traditions, and (d) sense of life purpose beyond the self.

Faculty who scored higher in the virtues of humility and compassion tended to also report stronger commitments to social justice, intercultural competence, and purpose beyond the self. These were unique effects for both humility and compassion, meaning both virtues had independent effects on these outcomes. Compassion among faculty was also related to higher levels of respect for religious diversity. Notably, these findings—all beyond a measure of spiritual impression management—suggest the results cannot be easily reduced to “virtue signaling” or potential biases in self-report data. Participants had freedom in self-reporting all responses. For example, those who described lower levels of commitment to

social justice also tended to rate themselves lower on items indicating levels of humility and compassion.

These faculty formation findings related to diversity and justice commitments appear to be novel, as virtue factors like humility and compassion do not appear in previous research with seminary faculty. We built upon Deborah H. C. Gin's studies of predictors of multicultural engagement by seminary faculty, which identified certain personal development and socialization factors as influential.

It is essential to also conduct studies evaluating particular diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and training programs for faculty. The systemic ecologies of seminaries influence these issues well beyond the dynamics of individual faculty members but, at this polarized time when DEI issues are sometimes cast as purely matters of “opinion”

or “ideology,” it is useful to explore connections to key aspects of healthy spiritual formation. These faculty formation findings also resonate with a larger

set of studies on seminary student formation, diversity, and justice commitments in ways that suggest important connections among these domains.

Student formation, diversity, and justice

Our Danielsen Institute research team has published 12 empirical studies in the past decade investigating various spiritual formation factors relating to diversity and justice commitments involving more than 2,400 seminary students at predominantly Christian schools in the US. Consistent with the faculty research above, the results show commitments to diversity and justice among students are positively associated with a wide range of healthy signs of spiritual formation—higher levels of hope, general humility, intellectual humility, compassion, interpersonal forgiveness, faith maturity, relational and emotional maturity, moral concerns about fairness and harm toward others, and positive engagement with faith in coping with stress.

We need further research exploring the impact of specific DEI efforts within seminaries and the overall organizational climate on the spiritual formation of students of diverse identities.

We have also found seminary student levels of intercultural competence (based on the Intercultural Development Inventory [IDI] recommended by ATS) were positively associated with spiritual well-being, spiritual seeking, gratitude, humility, and relational and emotional maturity, while being negatively associated with spiritual grandiosity and shame-prone spirituality. Some of these studies included the spiritual impression management scale mentioned above and the IDI is not susceptible to impression management effects. While we cannot make causal connections among these factors, the overall picture suggests that diversity and justice commitments among seminary students tend to be consistent with the formation of spiritual maturity.

It is important to note most of our studies were conducted at evangelical seminaries, and the multi-seminary studies had solid representation of conservative-leaning schools. Our findings are not restricted to progressive seminary contexts, but are weighted in the direction of relatively conservative seminary students. Christian faith traditions differ in the emphasis placed on social justice, and these differences can feed into current debates in faith communities regarding these issues.

We are *not* implying all seminary students committed to diversity and justice are thriving. Active diversity and justice work can be stressful and brings risks for suffering and trauma—some students are also deeply struggling. This is particularly a risk for students with marginalized identities, and the struggles are compounded when they do not experience their seminary environments as hospitable to their identities and formation needs. We need further research exploring the impact of specific DEI efforts within seminaries and the overall organizational climate on the spiritual formation of students of diverse identities. Too often, programming decisions rely on anecdotal impressions without more rigorous evaluation.

We also note our longitudinal research on changes in social justice commitment among seminary students (from 2019 through 2021) did not find evidence of sustained change in commitment levels, as “rebound” effects tended to bring scores back to baseline. This study also included measures of right-wing authoritarianism (e.g., “What our country really needs instead of more ‘civil rights’ is a good stiff dose of law and order.”) and compassion. Similar to the faculty research, social justice commitment and compassion were positively associated among students and increases in right-wing authoritarianism among students predicted decreases in social justice commitment and compassion over time.

These findings during a time of tremendous national protest and debate about social justice issues (particularly racial justice) speak to the challenges of fostering long-term change. They invite urgent pedagogical questions for theological educators who care about social justice.

Implications for theological education

We see several implications for theological education from all of this research.

1 *There is a need for further work integrating spiritual formation and DEI training among seminary faculty and students at both scholarly and programmatic levels.* In light of the few well-developed frameworks and practices for formation-based growth in diversity and justice commitments, we propose our evidence-based relational spirituality model of formation that supports the development of diversity and justice capacities. Frameworks based on other theological and social science perspectives could also be helpful.

At practical levels, spiritual formation and DEI work are often peripheral, superficial, and extracurricular areas within theological education despite the reciprocal relationships among them as suggested in our research. Those of us engaged in theological education might consider the relational and developmental capacities necessary for emerging religious leaders to both (a) cultivate and sustain spiritual formation within themselves and

others and (b) effectively engage diverse relationships toward goals of greater social justice.

2 *Those of us involved in theological education can benefit from grappling with complex practical questions about spiritual formation, diversity and justice work, and suffering.* This might involve interdisciplinary and holistic considerations about the ways seminary systems can support the emotional, relational, and spiritual capacities necessary for sustained commitments to growth in areas like intercultural effectiveness and social justice commitment.

For example, faculty and students who lack capacities for perspective-taking and compassion, emotion regulation, and healthy humility tend to struggle in finding constructive ways of engaging diversity and justice issues. Moreover, some faculty and students who struggle with elevated levels of narcissism or extreme forms of shame-prone spirituality can become highly dysregulated when their views on sensitive issues like diversity and justice are challenged. Microaggressions and more severe forms of discrimination also require systemic responses to cultivate healthy and formative seminary environments. These dynamics can present significant challenges in classrooms and group settings that require training for faculty, staff, and other leaders to manage.

3 *We need a dialectical formation perspective on suffering and social justice.* On one hand, we have heard faculty at multiple seminaries involved in this research minimize diversity and justice concerns as overreactions coming from “wounded” colleagues and students. This research counters that stereotyped generalization. Simultaneously, there are faculty and students—wounded or traumatized by discrimination and injustice—who need the spiritual virtues of compassion and humility for constructive responses.

4 *There is a need for further research on these issues in a wider range of seminary contexts and religious traditions.* These studies were all conducted in US Christian seminary contexts—more religious diversity is warranted. Our published research to date has mostly

used quantitative methodologies, and we are excited to move into qualitative and mixed-methods research to offer a thicker description of these dynamics. We also encourage multi-disciplinary research teams that include theologians and social scientists, researchers and practitioners, and staff members and students. Multiple

strengths and vantage points will be necessary for a highly textured integration of spiritual formation, diversity, and justice in theological education.

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