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Preparing Students for Life Beyond College: A Meaning-Centered Vision for Holistic Teaching and Learning, by Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang

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Book Reviews

Robert J. Nash and Jennifer J. J. Jang. *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College: A Meaning-Centered Vision for Holistic Teaching and Learning.* Routledge, 2015. 190 p. ISBN 9781138815032. \$38.95

In the book *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College: A Meaning-Centered Vision for Holistic Teaching and Learning*, Robert J. Nash, professor at the University of Vermont, and Jennifer J. J. Jang, Director of Student Diversity at Champlain College, bring a philosophical perspective to student engagement, giving even the most seasoned professor and practitioner tested tactics to create what is described as “meaning-making” experiences for students. Meaning-making is a term developed throughout the book as, teaching students how to ask questions that help them pursue meaning in their life. Nash and Jang believe, “a college degree must do more than prepare students to earn a living; it must also prepare them to live a satisfying, meaning-filled life” (p. vii). As a resource for faculty and staff, the book provides examples and strategies throughout for constructing “holistic meaning-centered” student learning (p. ix).

Each chapter begins with short quotes which set the tone and quickly communicate overarching ideas. Leading with quotes allows the authors to thread these ideas throughout the chapter, although they sometimes are cliché. Nash and Jang present how each topic can be applied in the classroom or used during interactions with students using lists of questions, strategies, or thought-provoking ideas. Often the most compelling section of each chapter is a practitioner’s story: a case study or guest author whom illustrate their applicable experiences with students.

Student experiences are offered throughout the book as testimonies to the student impact. It is these experiences that personalize the discussion and convince the reader of its application to student development and holistic learning. Holistic learning is defined as, education that “prepares students for life beyond college in every one of its complex, interrelated dimensions: the personal, professional, moral, recreational, relational, social, political, religio-spiritual, healthful, and vocational” (p. 3-4).

Nash and Jang advocate teaching students to ask the question “why?”. They explain it is through the pursuit of these answers where meaning-making, critical thinking, reflective learning and, therefore, holistic education can be cultivated. The authors provide a rationale for the development of holistic learning, not as a counter to the devel-

opment of job skills, but as an all-encompassing vision. Their aim is to help students find passion that leads to a vocation and provide ways for faculty and staff to help students through the discovery process.

Chapters three-ten, the bulk of the book, walks through developing a meaning-making quest that students embark on within a course or other kinds of student engagement. The following are suggested topics within a pedagogy centered on meaning-making: 1) a “moral compass”, 2) identifying hopes and dreams, 3) religious and spiritual discovery, 3) healthy core relationships, 4) exploring the intersections of multiple identities, and 5) service learning. Each area is presented using best practices for how to approach these topics to promote student self-discovery. Overall, each topic has a strong theoretical framework as well as peer reviewed research to support a conceptual understanding.

The practices described throughout the book play out in a culminating capstone course, the subject of the final chapter. This section not only fully develops the authors’ definition of a seminar, but also what the course might look like within almost any discipline. This chapter is full of ideas for anyone looking to offer a meaning-making centered capstone student experience.

A convincing argument is presented for the pursuit of an interdisciplinary approach to coursework centered on meaning-making; an assertion is made that any discipline can adapt the discussed practices. Examples are used from unexpected fields, such as a religion and spirituality course being housed in the college of education; however, there is little mention of how to get a class like this started and the challenges the faculty member might face doing it. Tools for overcoming challenges of implementation and curricular development are missing from the authors’ perspectives. Particularly for a large comprehensive institution, the question “how might this be applied across my campus or department?” goes partially unanswered.

The authors provide a fresh perspective on teaching philosophical ideals and values within various academic settings, particularly the classroom. Faculty and staff across disciplines are challenged to reimagine their courses and interactions with students to better position students to develop meaningful lives. Though well-organized thought-provoking questions, examples and strategies, *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College* is a practical approach to student learning and brings meaning-making to the forefront of student development, positioning students to gain tools and skills needed for life in and beyond college.

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