Anthro professor creates support group as safe space for religious discussion

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This group shot of original members of the Interfaith Initiative is from 2015, with Professor Bonnie Glas-Coffin in the center. Glass-Coffin, partnering with psychologist Monique Frazier, has created a support group in which students can discuss religion without judgement.

A new support group on campus is helping students improve their mental health by discussing their religious identities.

The support group was created by Monique Frazier, a psychologist with Counseling and Psychological Services, and Bonnie Glass-Coffin, director of the Utah State University Interfaith Initiative. They saw the need for students to have a place where they could discuss religion without any judgement.

“We spent some time talking about how we would cultivate a physical and emotional space where students felt comfortable sharing and being their authentic selves. Also where they could learn the tools for interacting respectively with people who are different than themselves,” Glass-Coffin said.

For many students in college, it is common to experience new ideas and meet new people when moving away from home for the first time. This change can cause students to wonder why they believe the things they do.

“This is about recognizing in your college years that it is such a common time to be figuring various parts of your identity. Your spiritual identity is no exception,” Frazier said. “It is really normal to have identity issues around faith and spirituality that you are sorting out. That is why it is important to have a safe space to voice that. It is the most normal thing in the world, but it doesn’t always feel that way to people.”

The support group creates a supportive environment for students suffering from stress, anxiety, or depression that is related to their faith, she said. Students who are not religious or who just want to discuss and listen to others are also welcome to come to the group.

The group stresses that it is not a place for students to belittle other religious traditions or be pressured to leave or stay in their faith of origin. It is a community without an agenda that provides support, acceptance, and safety as individuals journey on their own personal spiritual path.

“What we find is that as one begins to articulate why one feels and believe what one does, often times what happens is that their faith of origin gets stronger,” Glass-Coffin said. “This is a opportunity to learn how to bring your authentic self forward and not hide it in a way that can appreciate and respect someone that may have different views than you.”

Students have the opportunity to attend the support group as much or as little as they would like. It is a drop-in support group, and students do not have to be involved in other services at CAPS to attend. The facilitators of the group hope this flexibility will spark student interest.

“The idea with mental health and faith is that your spiritual life is enhancing your mental health,” Frazier said. “We understand there is oftentimes stress related to your spiritual life. Knowing that you are not alone is a big part of it. When people feel too much shame or unsafe to share their struggle it keeps them in struggle. If we can help each other out while we are here that is a really positive thing.”

Students interested in attending the group can drop in on Mondays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. in room 310B of the Taggart Student Center.
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Writer:
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