

UCLA's Student Affairs Leadership Forum: Holistic Interventions within Student Affairs

UCLA Division of Student Affairs

On October 19, 2005, UCLA's Division of Student Affairs held a Student Affairs Leadership Forum (SALF) designed to address to key issues of concern to the division, namely student mental health and the spiritual and religious commitments and practices of UCLA students. While both of these issues might represent seemingly disparate topics for conversation among student affairs practitioners, in fact, the SALF represents the first in what is projected to be a series of efforts by UCLA's Division of Student Affairs to "holistically" address student development issues as well as to facilitate meaningful opportunities for spiritual exploration.

What follows are a series of shared insights by key organizers of the UCLA/SALF meeting. We start with a brief interview of UCLA's Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Janina Montero in which she provides some background on the SALF meetings, the role that student affairs practitioners might have in facilitating spiritual exploration among students at public "lay" institutions, and the follow-on planning currently in the works at UCLA. We also offer a brief summary of key UCLA/CSBV findings on spirituality as presented by Judith Richlin-Klonsky and Jennifer R. Keup from UCLA's Student Affairs Information & Research Office (SAIRO).

An Interview with Dr. Janina Montero

As Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at a major public institution, such as UCLA, why do you feel compelled to address issues related to the spiritual development of students?

Over the last few years, we have gained a better understanding of the student as a whole person. There has been quite a bit of writing and research, if not at the very least considerable discussion about the most effective ways in which to develop students holistically.

The spiritual side, or the religious side if you will, of students is one that certainly hasn't received sufficient attention within lay institutions. Within Student Affairs, responsibility for the spiritual development of students is often assumed by affiliated organizations external to the university—the church, the synagogue, or other places of worship—while in some institutions the Dean of Religious Life takes responsibility for nurturing the spiritual dimensions of the student experience. What has become increasingly evident to me is that these are not our only options. Public institutions can, and should, support the spiritual growth of students. Those of us who work with students in what might be termed traditionally “lay areas” really need to take the issue of student spiritual development into account if we want to support students in a holistic manner. Just as we might wish to produce students that are “whole,” we need to provide meaningful advice and support that takes into account the spiritual side of the student. It is a matter that is seen as an important issue and institutions are starting to pay attention to different kinds of initiatives.

From a Student Affairs perspective, I would like us to encourage students to consider certain key questions, such as, “How do you do the right thing?” “What kind of framework should I construct in order to make important ethical decisions?” In crafting responses to these questions, you inevitably enter into issues of morality and values which in one way or another derive from the spiritual sense of self or from personal connections with a “higher power.” Over the last year I've been giving a lot of thought to the ways in which Student Affairs practitioners should be addressing these dimensions of the student. SALF (Student Affairs Leadership Forum) was an initial step in that direction. While we didn't necessarily have a clear end in mind when we organized the forum, we certainly considered it an important exploration that we hope will result in some sort of pragmatic framework for how to attend appropriately to these issues for our students.

How was the SALF meeting conceived?

Given the interests in issues of spirituality and concerns for developing more holistic approaches to student development, I wanted to have an opportunity to bring some of these larger topics to the attention of my student affairs colleagues. Two topics of particular concern to me are mental health—in other words, trying to meet the mental health needs of students—as well as improving the quality of discourse for engaging in difficult topics. More to the point, I wanted to find more viable ways for students to develop some expertise in how to engage in difficult conversations, disagree respectfully, and learn to listen. Addressing issues of spirituality is one context in which to do this.

Given HERI's work in the area of spirituality and UCLA's ongoing participation in the HERI freshman survey, we decided to organize the SALF so that we could look at issues of spirituality in more depth as they relate to our campus. Consequently, the purpose of SALF was to look at our own experiences

here on campus as a context for addressing the topic within a larger group of campus administrators, researchers, and Student Affairs practitioners. It actually worked out rather well.

What, among the UCLA/CSBV findings presented at the SALF meeting, did you find personally surprising or potential areas for concern?

I found a couple of things surprising. The UCLA-specific CSBV data seemed to indicate that a smaller number of students saw religiosity as playing an important role in their lives. I was somewhat surprised by that. Anecdotally, my sense was that there was a greater number that participated in organized religion than was reflected in our numbers. While this may, in fact, be true, I believe the need for spiritual outlets does not necessarily decrease commensurately. So, finding out how best to encourage greater balance in one's life, finding more useful ways for students to express themselves within diverse yet competitive environments, and building new pathways for spiritual expression are all important tasks for us despite this apparent de-emphasis on religiosity in the experience of UCLA undergraduates.

Among the findings I considered to be most promising was the readiness by students to engage with each other on these topics. I find this to be a very interesting finding, one that UCLA Student Affairs should capitalize on in some way. Certainly, it behooves us to better understand this pattern and find more effective ways to nurture this interest among students. In many ways this opens up new possibilities for engaging students in larger diversity discussions.

What kinds of follow-up activities are currently being planned as follow-up to the CSBV findings?

At the minimum, we would like to continue the conversation that we started through the SALF forum. It appeared as though many people had many things to say on this topic and time simply did not permit us to delve as deeply on these issues. We are planning a brown bag luncheon as a follow-up to the forum. Our hope is that this will be a more open-ended kind of conversation.

Whatever might result from this latest engagement, I think that I would like to see whether we, as Student Affairs colleagues, can generate specific ideas or explore directions that would be fundamentally collaborative. For example, we have a very active and broad-based health education emphasis in our Student Affairs division. It would be very interesting for us to look at spiritual health as one dimension for further exploration. We may also try to bring spirituality into our on-going conversations about diversity and quality of discourse between students.

The other topic that I thought was intriguing, and which surfaced in the SALF discussion, was to identify salient ways in which students can deal more

effectively with irreconcilable differences. How can we most effectively enter into this sort of conversation with students? How do students identify difference as irreconcilable yet engage with the “other” in a respectful and open manner?

I think the outcomes from the forum represent new and challenging sets of tasks for our division. Whether we can succeed in doing all of them is still unclear. However, these are the areas that I think serve as excellent focal points for future follow-up. Particularly in areas related to health education, it would be good to try and initiate some broad-based educational projects that include spiritual elements as a way to enhance student outcomes. While we’re still in the initial planning stages on a lot of these issues, I believe that our future activities will ultimately follow this “holistic” approach that we have prioritized here at UCLA.

To what extent are you planning to encourage cross-divisional participation in these follow-up discussions?

Well, we have to be co-curricular and we have to be cross-divisional in our efforts within Student Affairs. Unless we were to hire someone who focuses only on spiritual types of endeavors, we will have to arrange these conversations in multiple areas. Contrary to other topics addressed within the context of Student Affairs, the issue of spirituality lends itself to some level of self-disclosure, which is a tremendously important step in any sort of self-realization/self-reflection process. It offers opportunities to talk about personal decision-making and presents profound opportunities for a different kind of conversation among staff as well as between staff and students.

I envision the need for new forms of collaboration within our division. For example, in the case of our Office of Residential Life-- is the residential environment conducive to allowing individual students the opportunities to explore their spiritual lives? We also see the “wellness” aspect of spiritual health and well-being as tremendously important. Likewise, I envision incorporating some sort of cognitive component into future programming. Perhaps there are some readings that we would recommend to students. Or perhaps there might also be some sort of staff training that we develop to help facilitate these types of conversations. All of this is very new to us and will require some thinking through of how to do it effectively and productively within a lay environment.

The Student Affairs Leadership Forum (SALF): A Brief Description of Proceedings

In 2004, the UCLA Student Affairs Executive Management Group created a new professional development opportunity for Student Affairs directors and invited staff. The purpose of this opportunity was to create a forum to learn about

and discuss topics of timely relevance to student development and student services. The value of this Student Affairs Leadership Forum (SALF) comes both from the information presented and the ensuing discussion among attendees.

The 2005 SALF emphasized two topics relevant to UCLA undergraduate students: 1) mental health and 2) religion and spirituality. These topics were identified by the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Dr. Janina Montero, as cutting-edge issues and of critical importance to the practical agenda of student affairs professionals at UCLA. As such, one special characteristic of the 2005 SALF was the creation of presentation teams for both topics that included a researcher and a campus practitioner. This strategy ensured that both the big picture of these issues and how they play out in daily practice at UCLA could be fully explored from both empirical and applied perspectives. As a complement to the presentations, the UCLA Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) posted analytical studies of these issues on their web site (www.sairo.ucla.edu/sairo_recent_reports.htm) and disseminated the link to all SALF participants for review prior to the presentation.

The institutional data generated via the College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) addendum to the 2004 CIRP Freshman Survey served as the foundation of the SALF presentation on UCLA undergraduates' spirituality and religion. Some of the key findings from these data—and the basis for a rich discussion among Student Affairs professionals at the SALF—included the fact that students entering UCLA directly from high school appear to be less religious than their peers at other public institutions and than previous cohorts of students entering UCLA. However, these same students express an interest in spiritual issues, specifically as they relate to a personal quest for meaning and existentialism. Further, responses to various survey items representing a pluralistic world view suggest that UCLA students' strong commitment to diversity and multiculturalism may provide a meaningful intellectual approach to the topic of religion (i.e., as an element of culture). Finally, several SALF participants noted the intersection of spirituality and mental health as two important elements of students' intrapersonal development during the college experience.

The presentation on the role of religion and spirituality in the UCLA undergraduate experiences was received with a great deal of interest. SALF participants were very engaged in the presentation and raised insightful questions. They also expressed a desire to continue the conversation in order to more fully address incorporating spirituality and religion into student affairs practice and to explore the linkages between the two topics covered at the 2005 SALF. The Student Affairs leadership is currently considering the appropriate forum for a follow-up conversation.

Dr. Janina Montero is UCLA's Vice Chancellor for Student affairs. Prior to her UCLA appointment, Dr. Montero was the Vice President of Campus Life and Student Services at Brown University . She also served as the first Dean of Student Life at Princeton University

from 1993 until 2000. Dr. Montero can be reached via email at jmontero@saonet.ucla.edu. Judith Richlin-Klonsky, Ph.D. is the Director of the UCLA's Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO). Her email is jrichlin@saonet.ucla.edu. Jennifer R. Keup, Ph.D. is the Principal Research Analyst at SAIRO. Jennifer recently joined SAIRO after six years with the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). Jennifer can be reach via email at jkeup@saonet.ucla.edu.