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Adding Spirituality

Inside Higher Ed

Recent research coming out of the University of California at Los Angeles [suggests not only that undergraduates are far more spiritual than was widely believed, but also that they're seeking help with their seeking from their colleges – mostly in vain](#), it turns out. In an effort to help colleges better respond to students' spiritual quests, the lead researchers for the [Spirituality in Higher Education](#) project invited representatives from 10 non-sectarian institutions to Los Angeles in November to develop individual plans to better address matters of spirituality on campus. Researchers offered a progress report of sorts Monday, highlighting the actions leaders at Carnegie Mellon University, Miami University, in Ohio, and Florida State University have taken to better nurture student spirituality on campus since November, while more broadly outlining the discussions being held at the other seven universities still in earlier stages of the process.

"One of the big questions is how this can be done, particularly on public campuses and private non-sectarian campuses, in a way that there are not significant concerns about the meshing of church and state," said Jennifer Lindholm, director of the Spirituality in Higher Education Project at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. "Nobody is asking faculty to become priests or rabbis or anything else; nor is anybody suggesting that it's appropriate for faculty to tell students what to believe and why they should believe it."

Yet, she adds, "On the whole, for many people, if not most, these interior aspects of their lives, whether you want to call it spirituality or the core interior of who they are, is a critical part of how they go about making decisions, how they view the world. To ignore that is really to ignore a huge component in how people make meaning."

The initiatives being discussed do not focus on imparting religious doctrine but this idea of making meaning, of searching for purpose and values. Among the plans getting off the ground:

- At Carnegie Mellon, faculty members will pair with student affairs administrators and head to the dorms to lead weekly discussions with groups of 20 to 25 freshmen on the "big questions": "What is my role in the community? What is my authentic self and how do I honor that self?" said Indira Nair, Carnegie Mellon's vice provost of education. Faculty will choose foundational readings and enjoy the freedom to pave their own approach toward asking these questions during this fall's 12-week pilot program. While some instructors may embrace openly discussing spiritual matters, other professors have indicated discomfort with that approach and a desire to stay on "a more intellectual plane," Nair said.
- Florida State plans to develop training modules for faculty and staff members with a two-fold purpose: 1) to provide an overview of resources available for students seeking guidance on spiritual matters and 2) "to make sure that staff understand that spiritual development is just one of the types of development that students are experiencing while

- in college,” said Mary Coburn, vice president for student affairs. In many cases, the UCLA data shows, faculty are fearful of letting class discussions drift toward spiritual matters — a fear Coburn hopes to dispel. The goal, she said, is for faculty and staff to understand that spirituality is “a legitimate subject of conversation.”
- Miami is proposing that sophomores be required to live on-campus and engage in a “sophomore experience,” a co-curriculum focused largely around issues of purpose and meaning. The first-year experience is meant to orient students toward a life of the mind and get them invested in the university, said Michael Stevenson, the associate provost, while the second year should ideally offer them an opportunity to “reflect on their own purpose in trying to work toward leading a more integrated life.” The plan is still in its early phases, Stevenson said, and is at least one year away from realization.

Conversations happening at the other seven institutions that participated in the November event — Bates, Grinnell, Spelman and Wellesley Colleges; Furman University; and the University of California at Irvine and Los Angeles — are at less advanced stages, Lindholm said. But they revolve around such issues as engaging faculty, offering one-credit courses focused on finding a meaningful career and life path, revisiting institutional mission statements, and, more basically, finding more structured ways to address each student’s personal development.

— [Elizabeth Redden](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/05/08/spirituality>.