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Individual Colleges and Universities to Undertake Efforts to Help Students Explore Spiritual Issues on Campus

National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education at UCLA Helps Facilitate Development of Initiatives

Colleges and universities across the nation, from small private institutions to large public universities, have begun to implement programs on their campuses to encourage their students to explore spiritual issues. These efforts have included initiatives such as establishing training programs for faculty and staff to help facilitate exploration of these issues, to programs designed to engage students.

Research released earlier by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA found that four in five students have an interest in spirituality, three-fourths say they are “searching for meaning or purpose in life,” and more than three-fourths believe in God. The research is part of a major, multi-year national study of *Spirituality in Higher Education* conducted by HERI with support from the John Templeton Foundation.

A part of this study, a National Institute on this topic was held at HERI on November 14-16, 2006. Invitees to the Institute included teams of faculty and administrators from ten colleges and universities across the country:

- Bates College
- Carnegie-Mellon University
- Florida State University
- Furman University
- Grinnell College
- Miami University of Ohio
- Spelman College
- University of California-Irvine
- University of California-Los Angeles
- Wellesley College

“The National Institute on Spirituality provided a forum for open dialogue about possible ways in which colleges and universities can provide more curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to explore spiritual issues during the undergraduate years,” said Alexander W. Astin, the Co-Principal Investigator for the project. “The research shows that students are very interested in spiritual issues, and the goal of the Institute on Spirituality is to help facilitate the development of programs by each institutional team so students can explore these issues as part of the college experience.”



The ten teams engaged in open dialogue with each other and also worked individually with Institute consultants to develop action plans for new campus programs that will provide students with expanded opportunities to explore questions of meaning, purpose, value and other spiritual matters during the undergraduate years. During recent months several institutions have already taken action to implement elements of their plans developed at the Institute.

Action on Campus

Participants from the Florida State University (FSU) team, for example, are expanding a number of campus programs and initiatives. Mary Coburn, Vice President for Student Affairs, reports that the university has established a Committee on Spiritual Development and is developing training modules to better prepare staff, faculty, and peer leaders to participate in and facilitate discussions on spiritual issues. The FSU team has also developed a number of related initiatives: hosting an event for faculty to talk about their lives as academics and discuss the importance of attending to students' interest in exploring issues related to spirituality, meaning, and purpose; promoting inter-faith dialogues; and expanding the university's "oral competency" requirement so as to incorporate essays and perspectives about issues of spirituality, meaning, and purpose.

Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) team coordinator and Vice Provost of Education, Indira Nair, reports that a residential program for first-year undergraduate students living on campus will be launched this coming August. In this new program Faculty Fellows and Student Affairs staff will collaborate to engage students who live in residential houses to consider "big questions" from multiple perspectives, such as "What is the meaning of life?," "What is success?," and "What is my role in the campus, local, national, and international community?" Nair feels that "the implementation of this program will provide an important structure by which faculty, students, and staff can engage in critical discourse about the ways in which they view the world, the contributions they make, and the responsibility they hold for the health and well-being of their communities."

The team from Miami University (Ohio) reports about the creation and implementation of several new programs to focus on issues of spirituality, meaning, and purpose within their campus community. According to Associate Provost Michael Stevenson, the university is considering creating a "sophomore experience" for continuing second year undergraduates living on campus where students can participate in living-learning communities related to meaning-making and finding purpose. The team also has plans to extend existing theme programs in the residence halls to incorporate conversations around spirituality and the search for meaning and purpose. Additional plans include introducing a faculty dialogue on religious/spiritual questions in the classroom through the University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

The seven other institutions that participated in the Institute are developing additional comprehensive action agendas that incorporate a variety of new ideas and initiatives, including: encouraging a culture of reflection on campus; facilitating student self-exploration throughout the college years; integrating spirituality into the campus mission and vision statements; creating



“safe” spaces for difficult dialogs; inviting speakers to come to campus to talk on issues relating to spirituality; holding round-table discussions to encourage conversations on spirituality and religion; and creating sophomore-year initiatives to facilitate leadership development, among many others.

Detailed proceedings about the Institute are forthcoming and will be posted on the spirituality project’s Web site: www.spirituality.ucla.edu.

The Higher Education Research Institute

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, the Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

The project is funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which was established in 1987 by philanthropist and renowned international investor, Sir John Templeton, to encourage a fresh appreciation of the critical importance – for all peoples and cultures – of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Templeton Foundation seeks to act as a critical catalyst for progress, especially by supporting studies that demonstrate the benefits of an open, humble and progressive approach to learning in these areas.