

Creating a Campus Culture to Support Student Spirituality

By Mary B. Coburn

For several years, I have been thinking about how a large public research institution like Florida State University can impact college students' spiritual development. Traditionally, we have done an excellent job of addressing intellectual, physical, and emotional or social development but we have ignored spiritual development. We have applied the separation of church and state to our students' lives, separating mind and body from heart and soul. We were fearful that addressing this aspect of student life would be misunderstood as proselytizing or promoting religion.

In spring 2006 after hosting our annual Institute on College Student Values, I invited interested staff members to join me in a discussion about how we might approach a spirituality initiative. We examined our motivations, our environment and the supports and inhibitors on our campus. We struggled with these ideas for several months and then hosted a professional development lunch for interested staff to hear Jon Dalton present his work in student spirituality.

Throughout these discussions we kept getting hung up on definitions and the sheer magnitude of the task. We did not know where to begin. Fortunately, at just about this time, we received the Astins' invitation to participate in the National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education to be held in November 2006. We enthusiastically accepted and hoped that what we learned there would help us move forward. Perhaps the speakers and other participants would provide insights into their similar efforts to address spiritual development in a public university. Our team was ready for answers and solutions.

As soon as Helen Astin welcomed everyone to the Institute, I knew that this was going to be a unique experience. She invited us to begin by taking a few moments to "center" ourselves which I interpreted as "permission" to focus on our spiritual selves. If I had any doubts that this would be a different experience, they were erased at that moment. Participants were very open, discussing deeply personal beliefs and freely challenging assumptions and traditional roles of higher education. It was gratifying to hear the passion and commitment that participants felt toward the importance of supporting students' spiritual development.

Throughout the Institute I appreciated the opportunity to interact with and learn from all of the presenters and participants. It was stimulating to hear debates about the place of spiritual development in higher education and I was surprised to hear others express skepticism about its appropriateness in colleges and universities. I realized that I must have assumed that accepting the invitation to participate implied some agreement with the basic premise.

As the Institute progressed I was amazed by many of the ideas shared. I also found that the contrasts between public and private institutions challenged some of the artificial roadblocks that I may have constructed in my own thinking. I began to ask myself why can't we do some of these things at a public university. Further, if there are real obstacles for public institutions, what are other resources at our disposal such as campus ministers to fill the gaps.

The discussions also helped the FSU team appreciate some of the structures and resources that we have in place already to help us progress. Florida State has a University Values Statement and Seminole Creed, orientation sessions and a Convocation where we share our values with new students and their families, the Institute on College Student Values, and our Center for Civic Education and Service with strong partnerships across the campus and community. Further, the University is committed to a goal of "Educating Leaders to Make a Difference" that sets the expectation for all students to determine how they will make the world a better place.

Participating in the Institute helped FSU move from words to action. While we struggled with the definition of spirituality, we found that so did many others. A concept that David Scott shared at the conclusion of day two was especially helpful in this regard. He gave an analogy that spirituality was perhaps like a dimension in physics that existed but was not yet "unfurled." For some reason I was encouraged by that idea and heartened that we might have some role in the "unflurling!"

Another useful component was the FSU team interaction with our team consultant, Larry Braskamp. The consulting time pushed us to become concrete, to develop our action ideas, and to prioritize our goals. We have met several times since to refine our plan, to get buy-in from others, and to begin implementation.

Now that we are back on campus, our greatest challenge is to enlist faculty and other partners in this initiative. We have drafted a mission and vision statement with desired outcomes as a starting point for our discussions. Our Provost Larry Abele has agreed to support our efforts by co-appointing a Committee on Spiritual Development to be composed of faculty, students, campus ministers, and student affairs staff. One of our Institute team members, Bill Moeller will co-chair this group with a faculty member. The charge for the committee is to explore how Florida State can create an environment that supports students' search for meaning and purpose in their lives. After doing an inventory of current activities, we expect that programs will evolve from the committee that will educate students about the variety of expressions of spirituality and faith traditions and open dialogs within and beyond the classroom to stimulate reflection on

the meaning and purpose of life. Our first program will be held in April, a dinner dialog followed by a viewing of Martin Doblmeier's film, *The Power of Forgiveness*.

As one of our desired outcomes states, we hope that "FSU graduates will report that our community fostered their spiritual search through the profound questions they discovered, encouraged their pursuit of worthy goals, and guided them to identify a path through which they could make a meaningful difference in this world." Beyond the campus committee, Student Affairs will develop training modules to better prepare our staff, faculty, and peer leaders for discussions on the topic of spirituality. Long-term, we hope to identify common space on campus that can be viewed as "sacred space" to support and magnify spiritual pursuits.

When we began this journey in spring 2006, we had many questions. But, as is often the case with many questions that we ask in life, the answers we sought were not given to us but came from within ourselves. By being open to the opportunity to learn and participate in the Institute, we were equipped with tools and knowledge, and a little more courage, to embark on the task of creating a culture that supports spiritual development on our campus. Wish us well.

Mary B. Coburn has served as Florida State's Vice President for Student Affairs since January 2003. In the area of college student spirituality, Mary has been involved with the FSU Institute on College Student Values since its inception and currently serves as the director for the 2007 Institute. Last summer she initiated discussions about how to mobilize FSU faculty, staff, and campus resources to enhance the university's role in promoting the spiritual development of students.