

Big Questions: A First Year Faculty Fellows and Student Affairs Collaborative Program

By Indira Nair, Jennifer Church, and Harriet Schwartz

A team of four from Carnegie Mellon traveled to the Spirituality Institute in November, excited by the opportunity to learn from our colleagues and the phenomenal HERI team and to shape our ideas for incorporating questions of importance to our students' education.

Working through a few days of challenging and invigorating dialog with colleagues from other schools and HERI, as well as a wonderful dialogue within our team, we began to expand our views and refine our ideas. Starting with the proposal we created at the Institute and continuing the dialogue since our return, our team has been hard at work shaping and preparing to implement our program inspired by the Spirituality Institute. We returned to campus energized and focused, and this momentum fueled our work on a proposal to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which has evolved as the foundation for our "Big Questions" program, scheduled to be launched in August 2007 with our next incoming class.

The "Big Questions" program, a faculty-Student Affairs collaboration will include groups of fifty students in a sustained residential experience. Each group will engage in an exploration of "big questions." Our primary goal is to complement the Carnegie Mellon curriculum by providing students with opportunities and experiences that raise their awareness and knowledge of their role in the broader society. Many students in today's educational climate are not prepared to recognize their own values and ideologies let alone respect other perspectives.

Moreover, the modern university does not always provide intentional space or context for students to engage in open and exploratory dialogue about issues of personal and social responsibility and their broader role in the world. While we do this occasionally as part of our courses like "Engineering Ethics," "Exploring Connections" "Environmental Ethics," or "Privilege, Responsibility and Community," these courses still do not provide all students an opportunity to have a reflective, intentional mentored inquiry into the "Big Questions" of life.

Carnegie Mellon's residential model is uniquely situated to create experiences, which support the broad-based growth and development of each individual student. Residential houses build upon a tradition of intimate and distinct living communities focused on community development, leadership and self-governance, and personal development. About 800 first year students live within four first-year residential houses. The remaining 600 students in the first year class live throughout the residential house system on either first year floors or integrated within upper-class floors.

In the "Big Questions" program, we will broaden the impact of our exclusive first-year residential houses by creating a faculty fellows model, which invites faculty to engage students outside of the classroom in meaningful conversation. Specifically, we seek to develop the house community as a center of intellectual discourse and learning while fostering the development of intentional relationships between faculty, residential advisors, and students.

Students will explore "Big Questions" over the course of their first semester with faculty leaders who will maintain a commitment and connection to the residential house throughout the year. The program will include an opportunity for a common reading experience and discussion as part of our first year orientation program followed by bi-weekly house dialogues facilitated by a team of four faculty fellows and one house fellow per residential house. Each individual team (four teams per house in total) will construct a series of discussion topics drawing upon their areas of academic expertise as well as general areas of interest. Discussion will center on multiple perspectives in the context of questions such as:

- What is the meaning of life?
- What is the "good life"?
- What are the meanings of academic and professional excellence?
- What is success?
- What is honor?
- What is collaboration?
- What is my role in the campus, local, national, and international community? As a citizen? As a professional?
- What is fear?
- When does life begin?

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. We hope that by the end of the first year, students who participate in this program will:

- Understand their personal values and beliefs while maintaining an ability to respect and appreciate the perspectives of others;
- Understand and assess the impact of their responsibility to the university, local, national, and global community;

- Proactively engage others in conversations about personal integrity, respect for others, social responsibility, and community leadership;
- Utilize campus and community resources to enhance academic pursuits, metacurricular involvement, and social activism.

Attending the HERI Institute and having the opportunity to exchange views and lessons learned with our colleagues in the Institute has been an invaluable experience for us. Our formal efforts will begin with an informational breakfast meeting with interested faculty in the second week of April where we will be fortunate to have Jennifer Lindholm present the HERI findings as she did at the beginning of the November Institute. We are looking forward to this with excitement and a lot of hope and are grateful we were selected to be members of the Spirituality Institute!

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