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

UCLA's National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education helps facilitate development of initiatives

Colleges and universities across the nation, from small private institutions to large public universities, have begun to implement campus programs that encourage students to explore spiritual issues.

Recent efforts have included initiatives establishing training programs for faculty and staff to help facilitate exploration of these issues and programs designed to engage students.

Recent research by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies 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 was part of a major multi-year national study, "Spirituality in Higher Education," conducted by HERI, with support from the John Templeton Foundation.

A part of the study, a National Institute on Spirituality was held by HERI at UCLA from Nov. 14 to Nov. 16, 2006. Invitees included teams of faculty and administrators from 10 schools across the country: UCLA; Bates College; Carnegie Mellon University; Florida State University; Furman University; Grinnell College; Miami University of Ohio; Spelman College; the University of California, Irvine; and 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 Astin, UCLA professor emeritus of education and co-principal investigator for the HERI study. "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 10 teams engaged in open dialogue with each other and also worked individually with institute consultants to develop action plans for new campus programs that would provide

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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 taken action to implement elements of plans developed at the institute.

Action on Campus

Participants from the Florida State University team are expanding a number of campus programs and initiatives. Mary Coburn, FSU's vice president for student affairs, reported 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 also has developed a number of related initiatives, including hosting an event for faculty to talk about their lives as academics and discuss the importance of attending to students' interests in exploring issues related to spirituality, meaning, and purpose; promoting interfaith dialogues; and expanding the university's "oral competency" requirement so as to incorporate essays and perspectives about issues of spirituality, meaning and purpose.

Indira Nair, the Carnegie Mellon University team coordinator and vice provost of education, reports that a residential program for first-year undergraduate students living on campus will be launched this August. The program is a collaboration between faculty fellows and student affairs staff aimed at encouraging students who live in residential houses to explore "big questions" from multiple perspectives. Questions focus on the meaning of life, the meaning of success and the individual's role in the campus, local, national and international community.

Nair said 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 of Ohio has reported on the creation and implementation of several new programs focusing on issues of spirituality, meaning and purpose within the campus community. According to Associate Provost Michael Stevenson, the university is considering creating a program for continuing second-year undergraduates living on campus that would allow them to 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 about spirituality and the search for meaning and purpose. Additional plans include introducing a faculty dialogue on religious and spiritual questions in the classroom through the university's 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 dialogues; inviting speakers to come to campus to talk about issues relating to spirituality; holding roundtable discussions to encourage conversations on spirituality

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and religion; and creating sophomore-year initiatives to facilitate leadership development, among many others.

Detailed proceedings of the institute are forthcoming and will be posted on the spirituality project's Web site at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.

UCLA Higher Education Research Institute

The Higher Education Research Institute is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations focused 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 postsecondary education.

The spirituality project is funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, 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.