

Overview of the National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education

By Leslie M. Schwartz

A National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education was held at UCLA on November 14-16, 2006. The Institute was part of an ongoing national study of *Spirituality in Higher Education* conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) with support from the John Templeton Foundation. The Institute provided an opportunity to discuss and apply the initial research findings from the 2004 College Student Beliefs and Values (CSBV) survey, as well as explore many topics related to spiritual development and the search for meaning and purpose.

Institute participants included teams of faculty and administrators from ten institutions: Bates College, Carnegie-Mellon University, Florida State University, Grinnell College, Furman University, Miami University of Ohio, Spelman College, University of California-Los Angeles, University of California-Irvine, and Wellesley College. Team consultants and HERI staff members also assisted in presenting and facilitating sessions at the Institute. The overall atmosphere was one of open dialogue and discussion. Our primary interest was to facilitate the teams' development of action plans for integrating issues relating to spirituality, meaning, and purpose within their campus communities.

Opening on the evening of November 14, Institute participants and consultants gathered together to get acquainted over dinner and listened to some insightful opening remarks by Gene Rice. On the morning of November 15, the 65 participants met in a plenary session. Following Jennifer Lindholm's presentation of current empirical findings from the UCLA Spirituality in Higher Education project and brief remarks by Arthur Chickering and Scotty McLennan, the remainder of the morning session was devoted to a lively and thoughtful conversation on the topic of how to incorporate spiritual perspectives into the curriculum and co-curriculum.

Following the opening afternoon session, four participant subgroups were formed to discuss aspects of institutional structure and culture that can facilitate or impede efforts by colleges and universities to focus more attention on issues relating to students' spiritual development. Some of the ideas that surfaced included the use of theme courses, approaches for dealing with disciplinary differences, and strategies for forming closer links between curricular and co-curricular programs. A structural issue that

received a good deal of discussion was institutional size. It was suggested that larger institutions could utilize core courses as vehicles for focusing on spirituality.

Building bridges between the curriculum with co-curriculum was seen as a promising vehicle for thinking about and introducing spirituality perspectives on campus. Other venues where the topic of spirituality could be addressed included discussions of service learning, involving students and faculty in curricular planning discussions, and a systematic examination of the institution's mission statement and the role of senates shaping this statement.

Several other institutional issues were seen as potential barriers. On the structural side, lack of resources was perceived by many as a major barrier. On the cultural side, one of the issues that surfaced was the feeling that many faculty may be uncomfortable discussing issues related to students' spiritual development because they feel they lack expertise in the area. Nevertheless, other participants voiced the opinion that it is ok to "show your discomfort" and "to make space for not knowing." The second day of the Institute concluded with remarks offered by two of the consultants, Cheryl Keen and David Scott.

The third day of the Institute was devoted developing action agendas for each institutional team lead by an assigned consultant: Peter Laurence with Bates College; Arthur Zajonc with Carnegie Mellon University; Larry Braskamp with Florida State University; Sandy Astin with Furman University; Cheryl Keen with Grinnell College; Arthur Chickering with Miami University of Ohio; Scotty McLennan with Spelman College; Joseph Subbiondo with University of California, Irvine; David Scott with University of California, Los Angeles; and Gene Rice with Wellesley College. These conversations were characterized by much thoughtful discussion and they resulted in the creation of ten unique and dynamic plans for curricular and co-curricular changes on campus.

Currently, we are preparing detailed proceedings be share with the Institute's participants and the larger Higher Education community. The research team and Institute consultants may also do periodic follow-ups with the institutional teams to learn about their progress and continue to provide assistance in reviewing and implementing their action plans. Overall, the ability to meet with a diverse group of colleagues from around the country created an environment that fostered positive, collaborative discussion that was translated into practical action plans for each campus. Our hope is that this Institute will provide a starting point for ongoing discussion about issues of spirituality, meaning, and purpose within Higher Education.

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