

## Landmark Institute on Religion on Curriculum and Culture Launches SVHE Initiative in Promoting Religious Literacy

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- September 2008

Faculty developers at an urban public community college in the northeast are creating workshops to provide instructors with skills on facilitating educational in-class dialogues on religion. A large mid-western state university is introducing an on-line course to train professionals on dealing with matters related to religious belief and practice. And Student Affairs staff at a west-coast private university are creating an undergraduate interfaith and social justice living-learning community.

What do these ventures have in common? They are among the projects that campus teams from across the country developed at last June's SVHE Institute on Religion on Curriculum and Culture in Higher Education. From June 15 – 20, representatives from ten campuses across the United States gathered in Connecticut to create programs aimed to increase religious literacy among America's college students. This exciting initiative has been made possible by a grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.

Academic and student life deans, academic administrators, campus ministers, student life personnel, department chairs and faculty in a variety of disciplines (including anthropology, English as a second language, journalism, literature, philosophy, political science, religious studies, the sciences, and social work) participated in the Institute. Undergraduate and graduate students were also present and offered much through their full participation. Many types of campuses were in evidence, including state colleges and universities, a public community college, private non-sectarian colleges and universities, and religiously-affiliated institutions. Nearly every region of the U.S. was represented. This diversity allowed for enthusiastic inter-institutional connection, dialogue and exchange.

With Bob Spivey's leadership, the week's agenda offered rich opportunities to dialogue, reflect, increase knowledge and develop skills. Each day commenced with several plenary sessions by expert "faculty" (representing fields such as educational processes, law, literature, philosophy, and religious studies). They addressed theoretical/conceptual issues related to the study of religion, as well as practical and experiential topics such as engaging in difficult dialogues and assessing learning outcomes. Afternoons were largely devoted to work by campus teams on their projects, with the mentorship of an assigned "faculty"/mentor. In the evenings, campus teams presented their projects-in-progress to their peers for discussion, questions and feedback.

The types of projects under development varied greatly, including the introduction of courses and course modules addressing the role of religion in contemporary life, university-wide assessment of learning objectives related to religious literacy, and the development of a minor related to religious studies. A complete list of campuses involved and their projects is available on the SVHE website.

On feedback-assessment forms, participants reported that they found the week valuable for making headway in conceptualizing and developing their campus projects while learning from peers at other institutions. They appreciated new ways of conceptualizing the study of religion and skills for conducting democratic dialogue, as well as approaches to fostering student cognitive development. In the words of one participant:

“What I valued most about the conference was the opportunity to share ideas and experiences with many thoughtful people, most of whom I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet if it hadn't been for the conference. I came away...with an increased awareness of the diversity of perspectives on different issues as well as the shared concerns of people from different walks of life.... The opportunity to work on our own projects, and then receive feedback from the other participants proved to be an invaluable learning experience. For these and other experiences, I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the conference.”

During the coming year, communication will continue with and among campus teams as their projects progress. Following implementation and assessment of project outcomes, a publication will be compiled. This publication will serve as a foundation for discussion and to provide a range of models for higher education institutions across the country that are considering and pursuing these issues.

Presentations at national conferences are also in the works to disseminate ideas and promote broader exploration of this venture. SVHE members attending this fall's conferences for the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion are invited to learn more through sessions on this program. On Saturday, November 1, at 11:45 am, Institute participants and faculty will conduct a session on “Religious Literacy: Models for Curriculum and Culture in Colleges and Universities” at the AAR conference in Chicago. On Saturday, November 22 at 1:30 pm, a discussion on “Teaching Scriptures and Religion in Secondary Public Education” will be held at the SBL meeting in Boston. These will be valuable opportunities to engage in dialogue about the Institute, campus projects, and the Religion and Public Life initiative – a dialogue that should continue over the coming years.