Transforming Higher Education Through Authenticity, Spirituality, and Reflection

The Initiative for Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (IASHE) has grown to another stage of its development. I was fortunate to be able to attend a retreat of this organization in the Laguna Hills south of Los Angeles a couple of days before I left for Abu Dhabi in late February.

This organization grew out of a synergy created at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan. A group loosely called an "Advisory Group for Higher Education" began to discuss some of the lacks of communication in higher education that are more enduring and accepted core principles such as caring for the health, well being, and development of our students. We began to hear characterizations of higher education as having drifted from our core general education and developmental formation principles to more externally diverse market motivations. A document issued and signed by fifteen members of the initiative group asserts the following:

> We believe that higher education is dominated by objectivity and rationalism, largely in the service of materialism and economic productivity, at the expense of other important issues and human values. The empirical rationalism implies the existence of natural laws and an objective reality. It only allows for this kind of knowing. This orientation rewards doing rather than being. One-way knowledge transfer is the mode, rather than the two-way, collaborative search for meaning, understanding, and community. In contrast to this dominant orientation we believe that our most important contributions, our communities, and our nation flow more from who we are and how we live, from what we know and preach.

The document goes on to quote findings of the late Earnie Boyer's 1987 study of U.S. colleges:

> Scrambling for students and driven by marketplace demands, many undergraduate colleges…are confused about their mission and how to impact the shared values on which the vitality on which both higher education and the society depends…it is too much to expect that even in this hard-edged competitive age, a college graduate will live with integrity, civility--even compassion. (We will distribute the IASHE white paper and Arthur Chickering's *Change* magazine article in "Reclaiming Our Soul" in higher education at this summer's Sedona Conference & Conversations.)

Discussions at Laguna took us to agreeing on collaborations with Peter Lawrence who has led a series of transformative-centered symposia and conferences on spirituality and higher education, one of the earliest which I attended at Wellesley College sponsored by Wellesley's president Diana Chapman Walsh. Peter has brought together the wider ranges of scholarship on transformation and spirituality in higher education through Wellesley's forum.

David K. Scott, who now has launched an integrative studies program in Massachusetts, discussed his vision for a program that pieces together its contemplative studies and processes that bind general education and richer pockets of exploring spirituality and authenticity. Both collaborations with Peter Lawrence and David Scott forge an innovative consortium that mutually undergirds this important work. IASHE and Peter and David's programs will still retain their identity and decentralized focus.

David Scott has already linked our group to an "Education as Transformation Newsletter" which can be accessed at <east@Wellesley.edu> and which discusses a "Regional Symposium on Contemplative Practice in Higher Education" to be held at Amherst College, May 9-11, 2003.

Cynthia Johnson graciously hosted the IASHE Laguna Hills meeting, and we will meet again in early August in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. I am excited about this group to which I am pleased to belong. Arthur Chickering and Donna Shavlik, two members of the IASHE group, will be on the program at our Sedona Conference & Conversations in June (June 18--21, 2003).