Summary of October 28, 2009 Session of Religious Life Review

Materials and summaries from previous sessions are available at each session as well as on the EIP website.

Sankofa is a journey.
"We must go back and reclaim our past so that we can move forward...so we can understand why and how we came to be who we are".

Mary Ann Shurig, Assist. Prof. KSPT, served as convener of the Oct. 28th session on the work of Our Journeys with Persons of Color: Sankofa (BSA/ASA). She introduced Lela Mixon, Assoc. Dir. Career Services, who opened the discussion with a Power Point presentation about what we have learned thus far about ministries to and with students of color (both African-American & International) at the University of Indianapolis. See the www.eip/uindy.edu web-page for a copy of this presentation.

In the Fall of 2003 Lela was invited by Provost Everette Freeman to participate in completing UIndy’s application for the Indianapolis Mayoral Diversity Awards. Through this process, she became aware of the fact that the University’s accomplishments in the area of diversity matters were decentralized and less than optimal. She was inspired to write some thoughts on how the university could create a mentoring program for students of color to increase engagement and retention that she shared with the provost. She believes that proposal was shared with Michael Cartwright as he was completing a grant proposal for the spiritual engagement of students of color. This led to the spirituality needs survey in the Fall of 2004, participating in the UMC Maafa Pilgrimage to Senegal, and creating the Sankofa Mentoring program.

The results of the African-American Students Needs Assessment (2004-2005) revealed little involvement in religious life on campus. During 2006-07, due to the efforts of members of the Africana Spirituality Committee, something close to a “critical mass” of Africana Students participating in various programs was achieved. Statistics reported to the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment for the PHASE III Vocations Project showed a total of 78 students participated in the various Africana Spirituality programs offered during Sem. II, 2006-07. From that programming committee, a “steering committee” was developed with the mission to steer the campus in recognizing and celebrating the gifts of the Africana culture and its community members.

“...The Africana Spirituality Steering Committee makes the giftedness of the Africana spiritual traditions visible to the University of Indianapolis. To that end, we seek to help the university community discover, engage and share in those traditions, recognize our common humanity and celebrate our uniqueness.” This was the mission statement of the Africana Steering Committee. Why “Africani”? It was the agreed upon term used for anyone who recognizes a connection of their lineage to the African continent, regardless of nationality.

These were the programs developed and fine-tuned to execute the mission of the Africana Spirituality Steering Committee.

- Prominent African Americans were recognized and celebrated through the Sages Programs and the Sage display: 2005: Rev. Eugene Blair, Rev. Glandion Carney and Rev. Sofia Fosma 2006: Rev. James Massey, 2007: Fr. Boniface Hardin, OSB, 2008: Jearlyn Steele and Regina LaRoche. The 5th annual gathering had the highest attendance among students and that was most likely due to student participation in the event. The last sages event according to Michael Cartwright “ended where we had hoped to begin.”
- Africana students were engaged in the Sankofa Mentoring Community and the Voices of Worship Gospel Choir. The Sankofa Community visited companies who were interested in a
diverse workforce. Sankofa is about community. Intent is to increase the retention and college completion of Africana students by addressing issues related to the transition to college, creating connections, and by supporting academic, spiritual and professional aspirations. The Sankofa community is open to those who recognize their African ancestry and can relate to the experience of being underrepresented in our campus culture regardless of national origin, religion, gender, or skin tone. May 2007 the Sankofa Mentoring program started with 13 mentor pairs. In year 2007-2008: 108 total attendance at brown bags/forums so an average of 12 at each gathering – additionally each session has at least 3-6 staff members – guest speakers are faculty and administrators. Twelve student and 3 staff went to National Underground Railroad pilgrimage. An overnight pilgrimage to Detroit to the Charles Wright African American Museum was discussed but was not accomplished.

In addition to the Outcomes of the Phase III Project, the committee established benchmarks to measure progress. Measurement was centered around activity of Africana Students. Programming and efforts had positive results and affects, success for each individual measurement varied. The committee was operating on data collected in 2004 year and the committee formed in 2006, but program planning and activity really took off in 2007. Did we set our goals higher than were realistic considering the attitude about the climate that students expressed?

African Americans needed or wanted a welcoming environment that celebrated them, and we wanted to do that while encouraging them to be engaged. Michael Cartwright stated that students of color did not feel recognized and welcomed on campus. Until the Sankofa display was unveiled last year, there was no public display about African Americans at our University. “When I came I didn’t see anything like me that suggested that I was welcome here,” was a comment an African American staff member made to Cartwright.

Fellowship activities were planned such as going to see a play and eating out together. Sankofa had an opening picnic is 2008 that was well attended and received with a sense of hope. This event had about 90% black and 10% white in attendance. So, when a climate for engagement and celebration was created, students responded (green).

Mary Ann Shurig asked why the opening picnic did not happen this past fall. Lela replied that this was due to a couple of things—funds and time. The grant funds have run out and Lela was doing the Sankofa mentoring all on volunteer time in addition to her job. The returning students are very discontented that the programming for Sankofa was scaled down. The students like to be recognized but they do not want to form an RSO. They did not want to compete with ASA and BSA. Jyotika asked if it could be done in conjunction with ASA/BSA. Jyotika stated that student are so divided by different committees maybe the committees should be combined so student efforts were not so thinned out.

Lela said the leadership of ASA and BSA actually helped to get the word out about Sankofa. Sankofa was something different than ASA or BSA. Jyotika asked how Sankofa was different. Lela stated the type of programming. Sankofa had energetic leadership from staff. Michael stated it was a more focused endeavor. There is no thread of continuity with BSA/ASA like the International group such as the India Student Association has with the Diwali celebration. Kory Vitangeli stated that Sankofa had an actual office supporting it and Sankofa was explorational, educational, and was helping to further their personal journeys.

Michael Cartwright stated that Sankofa was not scaled down because of lack of money. In fact, we have budgeted $2500 for Africana Spirituality for the 2009-2010 academic year. Lela stated that a lot of research would be required to have a quality event for $2500.
Lela talked about what she experience as the coordinator of the Sankofa Mentoring Program. The activities that she led increased the number of students who want to talk. “Once you open the door” like was opened through Sankofa it increased the number of students who want to talk to Lela and there are additional connections requiring more of Lela’s time away from her already filled work schedule in career services.

Jyotika mentioned tying an event to a course like Ted Franz’s “Hip Hop and History” class and Michael stated that is where they got the ideas for mini-grants to encourage this type of activity. Michael, Pat Jefferson, and Krysi Leganza set up a $5000 fund of mini grants for fac/staff to create courses to explore topics on African Americans and they had zero applications. Michael mentioned that Terrence Harewood, a pre-tenured faculty member, did a civil rights pilgrimage over spring term. There were 6 students, 2 from high school. It was noted that staff can not do a spring term course.

When we asked Africana students to participate in planning activities, they marginally responded (yellow). Jyotika Saksena asked “What is becoming involved? Is it possible to do a survey of students to see what support they want?” And when we think back to the original goal of the 2004 student assessment….is there an increased participation of students of color in programs offered by EIP???? (red?) Is that a fair assessment? Mary Ann asked “what is the intention behind an event?” and the answer is retention. Mary Ann stated that mentoring has been established with African American clinicians. Lela stated that was initiated through the Sankofa mentoring group.

Jeremiah talked about African American students’ participation in religious life this semester on campus. There are approximately 45- in Chi Alpha (there is a black student leader around 26 years of age from off campus leading Chi Alpha), around four regularly attend Thursday Night Alive Praise and Worship and there are about half a dozen students in the Voices of Worship choir. Jyotika asked if religious life is a concern raised by African American students and the resounding answer was yes.

There were about 13 members on the steering committee; the “core” departments were EIP, SAL, and Music Department. Why these departments? Because of funding, academic credit and the participation of key campus leaders and/or “decision makers”. Steering committee members included: Michael Cartwright and Lang Brownlee, Pat Jefferson-Bilgy, Geoffrey Kelsey, Lela Mixon, Paul Washington-Lacey, Brenda Basis, Stint Clark, Kedah Ward, Elisha Smith, and Joyce Minette Valentine

“Although my proposal was written before I saw the student retention data (freshmen to sophomore year retention rates for International Students, African American Students and White Students), this data was used to promote the importance of continuing the path the Africana Spirituality Steering Committee was pursuing. As most would expect, the retention and graduation rate of African American students is less than that of other groups. What we hope to learn, is why is it so erratic?” International Students are retained at 100%, white students at around 70% consistently, and African American anywhere from 25% to around 65% but not consistent from year to year. Perry Kea stated that the number of African American students in 1994 was well under 200. Michael Cartwright stated that there around 400 African American students this year. Jeremiah Gibbs commented that the magnitude of the numbers is erratic because of the smaller number of African American students compared to Caucasians. Terry Schindler mentioned that international students are in co-horts now and that might help with retention rates. Jyotika Saksena stated that the international students do not have an option to drop out. Maybe through intentional conversations and programming, the African American retention data can be stabilized and improved.

Lang Brownlee talked about religious life on campus before the needs assessment. The EIP Office had created a Chapel Steward of Praise, a paid position through the EIP office, to help form African American student leaders. This position was to be a connection between the EIP office and the gospel choir and to
help get African Americans to local churches. This position did not accomplish what had been hoped and the position is now held by a white student with different responsibilities. Perhaps in the future an African American chaplain should be considered to serve the spirituality needs of African American Students.

Jyotika mentioned in her spring term class she had a core group of African American students and white students but they separated from each other in and out of class. She asked what can be done to bring the two together.

Terry Schindler asked Michael the results of the needs assessment survey. Michael replied that African Americans wanted to feel welcome and have a sense of being recognized, the presence or absence of iconographic representations on campus is one factor in making students feel welcome or not welcome. The Crossings Mural is an example of the kind of pictorial representation that contributes to students feeling that they are welcome. Some students of color believe that international students are made to feel more welcome than African Americans. There is an international office and flags for all the countries. There is a Chinese art gallery in the lower level of Schwitzer. There is the Greek/American Institute.

Jyotika suggested an African American Studies Certificate. Michael has taught African American studies at another university but he has found that Ulndy’s curriculum is not configured in the ways that would make it possible for him to teach a course like “Black Religion and Black Radicalism” or “The Novels and Essays of James Baldwin.” Cartwright has also found that when Euro Americans want to engage Africana topics, Africana individuals are suspicious of their intent.

Lela stated, “What I have taken away from my involvement with the Africana Spirituality Committee is an expanded awareness of ethnic and spiritual traditions and cultures. When I think about diversity now, I think beyond American diversity, but am more inclusive of our international neighbors. Ethnic and spiritual diversity recognition and support matters because without that foundation, it is difficult to celebrate these differences. From my participation on the ASSC, I hope for these goals and I think that they are possible due in part to the efforts of the EIP. The office of EIP has been instrumental in drawing awareness to various campus populations and creating opportunities for the creation of programs and resources to address these issues.”

The next Religious Life Review is scheduled for Wednesday, November 18th at noon in SC011. Panel Discussion: Interfaith Venture 1999-2009 with Convener: Jeff Bryant, Social Work. In the wake of Eboo Patel’s visit to our campus to discuss the work of the InterFaith Youth Core, Chaplain Lang Brownlee and an interfaith panel of faculty and staff take the lead in discussing the way that we have already engaged one another “beyond parish and ghetto” and ways that we might yet engage one another. Recommended reading: Giving and Receiving Hospitality booklet about EIP office.