Summary of the March 17th Religious Life Review Discussion of the Student Survey

Kory Vitangeli explained the ways that she attempted to get student input for the religious life review process. Our initial plan to conduct one or two focus groups turned out not to be viable in part because of student schedules at mid-semester. When that did not work out, Kory decided to use the Survey Monkey technology to solicit student perspectives on religious life.

Kory presented the results of the survey, beginning with the demographic breakdown (see power point presentation to be made available on the eip web-page for details). In the end a total of 63 students completed the survey: graduate and undergraduate, male and female. The religious affiliation was primarily Protestant but Roman Catholic and “non-denominational Christian” as well non-religious perspectives were also included.

One of the delightful moments in the conversation with the EIP staff * was when Kory quoted a student who offered the perception that the University of Indianapolis is “Methodist officially, Catholic informally, any Christian denomination casually.” While it is not entirely clear what this person may have had in mind, Dean Cartwright found the description to be amusing even if not immediately clear in its reference. This might be an indicator that students have a growing awareness of the “conjunctive” patterns of religious life on campus within which overlaps exist as opposed to the segregated patterns of religious life that exist on some campuses. On the other hand, this comment may reflect student frustration with the EIP Office’s “both/and” sensibility.

Three times as many students indicated that the religious affiliation of the university did not have an impact on their decision to enroll at UIndy, but at least some of the 15 students who indicated that the UM affiliation did play a role were able to articulate in what senses that was the case.

Three out of four students indicated that they were satisfied with religious life on campus. The comments that were offered seemed to pertain largely to individual perspectives of dissatisfaction, with no real aggregate that would allow us to define a pattern of dissatisfaction. The chaplains and EIP staff were intrigued to learn that one student perceives that “we do well as ecumenical” but would like to see “growth” in interfaith programming. The perception that there are “too many groups” on campus was listed as one of the reasons for dissatisfaction, but other individuals indicated other reasons for their dissatisfaction, including the desire to have more opportunities for persons who are “searching for a faith system.” This comment and others like it appear to reflect the pattern of “spiritual but not religious” sensibility of persons who feel alienated from “organized religion” and the Christian traditions that are associated with historic religious denominations. Still other students wished that UIndy faculty would not to challenge their tradition Christian views by discussing scientific theories of evolution in required courses.
The statistics about student involvement in religious life at UIndy struck the chaplains as plausible, but the number of students who responded that they “did not know” that UIndy had chaplains or that they “never knew” that the university had chaplains seems to be skewed given the chaplains’ involvement in Welcome Week activities. However, this might be a concern to take up with the Admissions office. Should one of the chaplains address students during the summer registration days or another public setting as part of the enrollment process?

The Chaplains were intrigued to learn that a few of the students think that one of the things that UIndy can do to improve religious life on campus is to “lessen the number” of registered student organization groups that are active at UIndy. This would seem to put the chaplains in a double-bind. On the one hand, Rev. Brownlee and Rev. Gibbs need to avoid unnecessary duplication of groups. On the other hand, if they should become the arbiters that determine which groups are redundant, then they could be seen as favoring one group over another. Dean Cartwright wondered if this might not be an area where CPB could develop policies (for distribution of funding) that would encourage students to co-operate with one another to avoid the apparent duplication of efforts by registered student organizations. With this prospect in mind, suggested that this might be a place for the chaplains to be in conversation with Dan Stoker and Jessica Nickoson to determine what an appropriate kind of response might be to this concern.

We were not quite sure what to do about the responses to the last question of the survey, which invited students to indicate whether they would be willing to talk with someone about his or her responses. A total of 15 students gave positive responses, and 12 provided contact information. So we may be able to have a “focus group” after all! The chaplains and Kory Vitangeli will consult with one another about what if any follow up to do with the students who expressed a willingness to have further conversation about matters religious at UIndy.

*Please note: Because of the small number of persons in attendance at this particular session of the religious life review (due to several events that ended up being scheduled for the same time period), the EIP staff participation in the discussion was more prominent on this occasion.