Organizing a State-Level Conference on College Student Character
Blake Fry,
University of Central Oklahoma

Abstract
On November 13, 2004, the University of Central Oklahoma hosted the first Oklahoma Conference on College Student Character. This workshop discussed the motivation behind the creation of the conference, details on the planning process, the results of conference evaluations, future plans for the conference and a discussion on how a similar conference would be received in other states.

Introduction
On November 13, 2004, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) Department of Campus Life hosted and sponsored the first Oklahoma Conference on College Student Character. The conference attracted 234 students and educators representing six Oklahoma colleges and universities and numerous community based organizations. Details regarding the conference can be found at http://www.ucok.edu/campus_life/OCCSC.

The five elements of character education the conference planning committee chose to address during the conference were health, leadership, diversity, spirituality and service. The conference topics and the character education efforts of the UCO Department of Campus Life are modeled after the Criteria for Colleges of Character as identified by the Center for the Study of Values in College Student Development (n.d.).

Motivation
The original motivation for creating the conference came from a realization that in the State of Oklahoma, there was an absence of conferences dealing with elements of character education. In order to articulate the purpose of the conference, the planning committee created the following mission statement:

Generational theorists Howe and Strauss have suggested that due to its size, cohesiveness and access to resources, the American Millennial Generation has the potential to be the most powerful force in the history of mankind. We as educators must work to help Millennials develop effective leadership skills, an appreciation of diversity, a strong spiritual identity, healthy lifestyles, and a desire to serve others. If we as educators fail in this endeavor, there is no guarantee that Millennials will reach their full potential or use their unprecedented power to benefit their fellow man.

Assessment data made available to the conference organizers further emphasized the need for greater character education among college students in the Oklahoma. As shown on the CIRP and CSS surveys administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, students at the University of Central Oklahoma claim to be above average in their personal spirituality, but are behind national averages in their appreciation of the importance of basic components of spirituality such as developing a moral purpose and recognizing the interconnectedness of all things. Additional studies, such as the 2003 state health rankings published by the United Health Foundation (2003), show Oklahoma to be one of the unhealthiest states in America. Finally, Oklahoma has in recent years suffered as one of the country’s highest divorce rates (Ross, 2002).

Planning Process
The conference planning committee was made up of member of the UCO community as well
as representatives of community and faith-based organizations. The committee began meeting during the spring 2003 semester and distributed a call for programs to all student affairs professionals in the State of Oklahoma in August, 2004. The committee invited several speakers from outside Oklahoma in order to bring fresh perspectives and give the first year conference some added prestige. Among those invited to present were Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jody Williams and Brent Scarpo, producer of the film Journey to a Hate Free Millennium.

The conference was held on a Saturday, and the schedule was designed in such a way that members of any institution could drive in Saturday morning and drive back home that night. The conference was heavily subsidized this first year with student activity fee money from the University of Central Oklahoma. Registration costs were kept low in order to allow colleges and universities to register large numbers of students as this was a conference that covered several topics that have widespread appeal.

**Evaluation**

Evaluations were distributed to all conference attendees. Eighty-four evaluations were returned with a majority stating that they would attend any future Oklahoma Conferences on College Student Character. Several major points and recommendations were gleaned from the evaluations:

â€¢ By the end of the conference, many students, to a large extent, understood what diversity, leadership, service, health, and spirituality have to do with character, while other students still equate character with ethical decision-making and/or telling the truth. We must go beyond merely tying in topics to character during presentations. Perhaps highlighting the mission statement would be of assistance in helping students make a greater connection to character education.

â€¢ We should move forward with plans to include more schools in the planning stages of the conference. There were several students that listed participation by more schools as the one improvement they would make.

â€¢ Bringing in speakers from outside the state does add to the experience. Robert Page, from the University of Kansas, Brent Scarpo and Jody Williams all received very high marks considering they led full conference programs and had to appeal to everyone, not just those that selected their session.

â€¢ The conference filled a real need in the state as it brought together students from various backgrounds that may not have ever had meaningful interaction. Most conferences offered in this region are targeted to very specific student populations. A conference that purposely covers a broader range of topics created some greatly appreciated informal interactions.

**Future Plans**

The second annual Oklahoma Conference on College Student Character will be held during the fall 2005 semester. A workshop proposal focusing on the Oklahoma Conference on College Student Character has been submitted for the annual meeting of the Oklahoma College Student Personnel Association. The workshop will serve as an opportunity to learn how the conference can better serve the needs of students and to recruit additional members to the conference planning committee.

Thanks to discussions that took place during the Institute on College Student Values, the need to solicit faculty for program proposals has been identified. The ultimate goal is to make the Oklahoma Conference on College Student Character one of the premier student development workshops in the south central region of the United States, and that can only happen if faculty are involved in the planning and facilitation of the conference.
References
