

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

ksouza78@ufl.edu

Amy M. Hass, c/o Kristina Souza
Deputy General Counsel
University of Florida – Gainesville
P.O. Box 113125
Gainesville, FL 32611

Re: UF Quest program

Dear Ms. Hass:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. As you know, FFRF is a national nonprofit dedicated to upholding the separation between state and church. We appreciate your assistance in resolving the religious quotes on Heavener Hall in 2015. We write again to alert you to another constitutional concern that has recently come to our attention.

A concerned UF community member contacted us to report that the University is planning on implementing a program called “UF Quest,” which will be mandatory for all undergraduate students and has stated goals of “meaning-making” and “purpose-exploration.” There are several aspects of the program that appear to advance or prefer religion.

First, Angela Lindner, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Affairs, explained the purpose of UF Quest by saying that “all students will engage in mindfulness practices in this program, from learning how to meditate to encouragement in practicing their spiritual tradition to reflecting on what brings their lives meaning, and what they believe to be their purpose of life. Students will be invited to bring their mind, body, and spirit with them into the classroom”¹ In the same presentation, Lindner equated mindfulness with prayer, referred to students’ lives as having a “higher purpose,” and finished the presentation by wishing “God’s peace and blessings to all of you.” To Lindner, promoting religious beliefs and practices is obviously one part of the UF Quest program.

Second, we understand that UF Quest includes the designation of faculty and staff as “meaning mentors,” who will partner with students and aim to help them develop “holy grit,” a term coined by Tim Clydesdale to mean “exploration . . . ultimately involve[ing]

¹ See [youtube.com/watch?v=6mmRphFdjks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mmRphFdjks).

service to God and humanity.”² Given this description, staff who are designated as “meaning mentors” would reasonably understand that they are permitted, if not expected, to encourage students to believe in and serve God as part of their “meaning-making” growth.

Further, we understand that the Campus Multi-Faith Cooperative will be expected to work toward ensuring that students’ “meaning-making” exercises relate to their respective beliefs and traditions. We also understand that the University has connected with local religious organizations toward the same goal. This further shows that the University intends “meaning-making” exercises, and thus conversations between students and their “meaning mentors,” to include religious beliefs and practices.

Third, we understand that at least one course within the UF Quest program includes the book, “This is Water,” which disparages nontheism:

Because here’s something else that’s true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wicca mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.³

Finally, we understand that the UF Core External Advisory Board is predominantly composed of clergy, while there are no representatives of secular humanism or other nontheistic belief systems.

Taken together, there is a strong appearance that the University intends the UF Quest program, at least in part, to encourage students to practice and believe in religion.

As you know, it is well settled that the First Amendment “mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005) (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985)). This mandate is especially strong in the context of public schools.

Overall, 23% American adults identify as nonreligious.⁴ That 8-point increase since 2007⁵ and 15-point jump since 1990 makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification

² Tim Clydesdale, *Holy Grit! The Effects of Purpose Exploration Programming on Undergraduate Engagement and Life Trajectories*, 100 LIBERAL EDUC., 1 (2014).

³ David Wallace, *This is Water*, 7, available at metastatic.org/text/This%20is%20Water.pdf.

⁴ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

⁵ “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012) available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

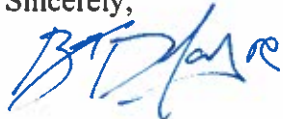
in America.⁶ Nationally, about 35% of millennials—those born after 1981, including almost all UF Freshmen—are nonreligious.⁷ Given the decreasing religiosity of incoming students, it is inappropriate for a University-sponsored mandatory program to encourage students to “practic[e] their spiritual tradition.” In particular, students who have recently left the religious tradition they were brought up in—a common instance among high school graduates—will understand that their school is encouraging them to return to that religious tradition.

We request that the University make appropriate changes to the UF Quest program to ensure that it does not include religious activities or otherwise promote religion. All staff who will be involved in the program should be reminded that they may not endorse or promote religion to students. All curriculum promoting “meaning-making” and “purpose-exploration” must do so from an entirely secular perspective. Reading materials critical of nontheism should not be included unless students are also assigned readings that are critical of theism in a similar manner.⁸ Finally, the program, including the UF Core External Advisory Board, should represent the demographics of students, and include nontheistic representatives at a level that corresponds to Pew statistics.

Recently, the University of Central Florida added a humanist chaplain⁹ and began explicitly including “non-religion” alongside religion in discussing student services¹⁰ and discrimination¹¹. We urge the University of Florida to follow UCF’s lead in supporting its increasingly nonreligious student body, rather than suggesting that nonreligious students lack meaning or purpose in their lives.

Please investigate these concerns and respond in writing with the steps that the University will take to ensure that its UF Quest program will not advance or prefer religion.

Sincerely,



Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Elaine & Eric Stone Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

⁶ Barry Kosmin, National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990.

⁷ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

⁸ If the University decides to balance its reading assignments in this way, FFRF would be happy to provide the appropriate literature.

⁹ See srmaucf.wordpress.com/humanist-chaplain/.

¹⁰ See rnr.sdes.ucf.edu/.

¹¹ See eeo.ucf.edu/documents/PresidentsStatement.pdf.