

Secular colleges attend to Mormon studies: Role in spiritual history of America noted

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Two American universities with no ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have plans to endow professorships in Mormon studies, making them the first secular schools to establish chairs in the academic study of Mormonism.

The programs, scholars say, could help push Mormonism and its academic study further into the mainstream.

Utah State University at Logan plans to launch the Leonard J. Arrington Chair in Mormon History and Culture in fall 2007, and the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University in Southern California plans a fall 2008 start for its Howard W. Hunter Chair for Mormon Studies.

Mormon studies, a field focused on comparative and analytical study rather than on encouraging belief, has been limited. "There is a lot of ignorance and superstition and fear of the Mormon religion, and so what is needed, really, is a serious understanding," said Karen Torjesen, dean of Claremont's School of Religion.

At Utah State, Mormon studies will be part of a new undergraduate religious studies program that began this year.

At the University of Wyoming, a proposal for an endowed chair in Mormon studies is in the "initial stages," spokesperson Jay Fromkin said.

The two endowed chairs show that people are beginning to take Mormon theology and history more seriously, said Robert Millet, a professor of religion at Brigham Young University and a member of the advisory council that is helping Claremont plan its program.

"Whether they agree or accept the prophetic claims [of Joseph Smith], they recognize you can't tell the whole story of spirituality in America without studying

Mormons,” he said. –*Religion News Service*