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## **ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

### **FSC Professor Off to England as Part of Prestigious Student Voucher Forum**

By [Cary McMullen](#)  
Ledger Religion Editor

The spires of Oxford may seem a long way from the constitutional battles over vouchers for Florida students, but a local professor will try to shed some light on the controversy at a forum next week at the University of Oxford in England.

Alan Smith, professor of religion at Florida Southern College, will participate in the prestigious Oxford Round Table, which begins Sunday and continues through Friday. He is scheduled to deliver a paper at Thursday's session, "Faith-Based Initiatives Meet the Public Schools: Florida's School `Voucher Program' and Its Effects on Education, Faith and Public Policy."

Smith will be one of 40 participants in the Round Table, 28 of whom were selected to present papers. As far as he knows, he says, he is the first Florida Southern faculty member invited to be part of the Round Table, which brings scholars together from around the world to exchange views on a variety of topics.

How Smith was invited is a bit of a mystery. He has visited Oxford and taught a short class in England as part of a Florida Southern program, but he has never attended a Round Table. For a while, Smith was acting chairman of the education department at FSC, and he says that may have fit in with the topic of this year's Round Table, Religion, Education and the Role of Government. He suspects a friend who participated in the Round Table a few years ago may have nominated him.

Smith says he seized the opportunity to prepare a paper about a subject he had long been interested in.

"As soon as the school voucher program was announced, my gut reaction was, this is a bad idea. This was a good opportunity to research why it's a bad idea," he says.

Smith's paper shows how the school voucher program, which allows parents of children in low-rated schools to send them to private and sectarian schools, fits into President George Bush's faith-based initiative, which gives religious

organizations government grants to carry out social services.

"I tried to show how they've worked, which basically they haven't. There's no research that indicated any educational gain," he says.

Smith is critical of some other aspects of the school voucher program, such as what he calls the disproportionately high standards for public school teachers and the lack of academic accountability in private schools. But he says the "most troublesome issue" in the debate has to do with the separation of church and state.

"One reason it's troubling is that no one in the state education system is in charge of ensuring that students are not going to be proselytized. In the literature, it says students are not supposed to be coerced, but who's going to check on it?" he says.

Smith, who will be traveling to England with his wife, says the Round Table program has a reputation not only for high-level academic discussion but for treating the participants well. The Smiths will stay at Lincoln College, one of Oxford's several schools, and spend a few days sight-seeing in London.

"It's a fascinating place. When I visited there a few years ago, I e-mailed my wife and said, I could picture myself teaching here. It's a heady atmosphere," he says.

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## **LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Dear Editor:

Your recent article about a Florida Southern College professor's presentation of a voucher paper at Oxford indicates that education reform has become bogged down by partisan politics, to the detriment of Florida's students. Academics should conduct research in search of meaningful answers, not prepare papers to support their own "gut reactions." Furthermore, those who claim to study the issue choose to acknowledge only the evidence that supports their own view. Alan

Smith ignores two 2003 Harvard University studies that found that public schools do respond to competition by improving achievement, and those schools that are at risk of losing students improve the most. When significant education data is dismissed because it doesn't support a partisan viewpoint, our children lose out.

Smith teaches at a faith-based college, where dozens of students enroll with Bright Futures scholarships and Florida Resident Access Grants, both vouchers. If vouchers are a bad idea for someone else's students, why not his own?

Sincerely,

Leah Cousart

Bright Future Scholarship Recipient

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