Addressing Religious Diversity in the Public Institution

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Existing in institutions of higher education is an ever-present doubt as to whether higher education should be addressing the religious and spiritual needs of its diverse student population. In public institutions, there is an assumption that religious neutrality promotes inclusivity, but this assumption does not negate the existence of religiosity and spirituality that permeates the lives of students. Emphasizing the value of a diverse student body cannot stop at merely establishing racial and ethnic diversity. Indeed, cultural diversity often has a religious or spiritual element that is overlooked in favor of adding diverse ways of thinking to a classroom or campus. Faculty, as a result, have diverse classrooms that may include students with any number of religious or spiritual backgrounds, and they are not always able to manage such diversity in a way that promotes positive learning for all students.

In the midst of political correctness, a consuming fear of constitutional infringement, and an increasing population of various religious cultures in the United States, institutions of higher education must establish programming for religiously diverse students that encourages an open understanding of the other, facilitates mutually beneficial dialogue between faith and spiritual traditions, and provides support for the individual student's faith or spiritual journey. However, administrators who work with students on a regular basis may not have the knowledge or experience that would be beneficial to provide support for students who may have spiritual or existential crises. In cases where institutions do not meet these needs, students may seek out their own support networks or student-run organizations. However, these organizations face barriers with the institution when they enforce their religious values on participation policies. This article argues that institutional responsibility for student religious or spiritual needs should be met through opportunities to facilitate dialogue about and between faith and spiritual traditions, institutional accommodations that support religious diversity, fiscal support for student organizations, appropriate classroom management, and inclusive learning environments and policies.

Who is Responsible for Students' Religious or Spiritual Needs?

On college campuses across the country, the question of addressing religious diversity and how to address it appropriately is an ever-present concern. Unfortunately for many students, "public higher education has enacted a strict and sometimes literal interpretation of the separation of church and state doctrine" (Magolda, 2010, p. 4). Such an interpretation suggests that colleges and universities leave questions of religion and spirituality in the hands of community faith leaders. Supporting this idea, Possamai and Brackenreg (2009) proposed that institutions may have less responsibility in meeting the worship and other spiritual needs of diverse students because local faith communities are more equipped to address them.

Because of the growing population of various religious cultures within higher education, there developed a need to analyze how institutions were, or were not, addressing religious diversity in the student population (Laurence, 1999). This project, known as the Education as Transformation Project, discovered that not only were there significant increases in religious diversity, interest in religion, and religious organization development, but also that universities had failed to establish programming for students that targeted these trends (Laurence, 1999). Many have come to believe that encouraging students to examine and think critically about different cultures and belief systems will prepare them to be better global citizens. Bryant (2006) proposed that, "the well-being of the nation and its people depends on learning to live with compassion and kindness as we encounter difference" (p.2).

The role that religious diversity plays in student learning has been the main focus and justification for advocating the recognition of, and services for, a student's faith or spiritual development. "Research has found that during a college experience frequent religious changes occur including a decrease in importance of religious values, increased skepticism about God, the church, and religious activities and lowered religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism" (Madsen & Vernon, 1983, p. 127). Because this is a time of questioning, of cognitive dissonance, students need the support of the college community to work through how they feel about these changes and how what they are learning is affecting their religious beliefs. Cole and Ahmadi (2010) argued that the power a student's religious or spiritual identity has on his or her academic and personal success is directly relational to whether an institution "can facilitate or provide opportunities for such growth to take place within a religiously diverse campus environment" (p. 136). However, some institutions such as the University of Michigan report that this aspect of learning is met through religious studies departments and other academic courses, not extracurricular programming. Kaplan (2006) explained that:

> Institutional funds do not support the various campus chaplaincies and religious organizations at Michigan, and personal religious views, practices, and identities have been treated as private matters. This tradition of institutional separation from issues of faith is, however, being challenged by growing political and social movements that emphasize the importance of religious faith in all aspects of

> intellectual life, including the sciences. (p. 42)

While the range of disagreement with incorporating religious and spiritual needs into university programming varies, the majority of concerns stem from a need to "avoid legal pressure under the Establishment Clause of the Federal Constitution" (Grubbs, 2006, p. 8).

Proponents of addressing religious diversity do so with caution. Stoppa and Lefkowitz (2010) suggested that the impact of religion and spirituality among students is evident in associations with various health-related and college adjustment outcomes. Additionally, "a religious community support network may be able to ease [students'] transition to college by providing access to religious leaders and fellow students who they can turn to for coping assistance in times of stress" (Duffy & Lent, 2008, p. 366). Furthermore, Kuh and Gonyea (2006) reported that, "spirituality-enhancing activities do not seem to hinder, and may even have mildly salutary effects on, engagement in educationally purposeful activities and desired outcomes of college" (p .46). There seems to be a consensus that the best way to foster relations among students of diverse religious backgrounds is by sponsoring dialogue initiatives dealing with issues of faith and spirituality (Magolda, 2010). Though much of university diversity initiatives have focused on race, gender and sexual orientation, it is becoming more necessary to concentrate those efforts on the prevalence of religious diversity and what that means for the student community.

Embracing Dialogue to Counter Misunderstanding

In a post-September 11 society, U.S. citizens are more aware, and often critical, of individuals who emphasize their diversity. A result of this hyperawareness is a recognition, yet also a misunderstanding, of various cultures and traditions. It is important to note that "religion is commonly given as the reason *behind* various cultural practices: it can influence the way people dress, the food customs they engage in, their socio-political views or the nature of their interpersonal relationships" (Tomalin, 2007, p. 625). For example, though individuals can recognize that a woman wearing a *hijab* is most likely a Muslim, people frequently mistake such a display of religious observance with antifeminism and oppression. This principle extends to college campuses where "religious diversity provides an additional layer of socially complex structures to those visually and culturally identified through racial/ethnic differences" (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010, p. 136). Students at institutions across the nation are exposed to the same groups of diversity that exist on a larger scale outside the campus community. As such, there is a need to recognize all religious groups on campus and to understand the differences among them so that students can be further prepared for encounters with diverse individuals in society after graduation.

When looking at the various religious groups that exist on college campuses, it is also imperative to examine intra-group, as well as inter-group, interactions. There is a risk that members belonging to religious organizations will not foster the types of dialogue that

encourage openness and understanding of other faiths. In a study done on Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish students, "members of each religious group directed less prejudice against their own religious group than was directed against them by members of other religious groups" (Blum & Mann, 1960, p. 100). However they may feel about one another, students who are members of religious groups on campus seem to exhibit the most amicable attitudes toward the college (Nelson, 1939). This suggests colleges should not ignore the presence of students who are actively engaged in religious organizations on campus, because it may be a rich avenue for colleges to explore while developing future student involvement initiatives.

Because of the historical prevalence of Christian tradition in U.S. society, many higher education policies have taken on a Christian subtext, privileging those that practice Christianity over another faith tradition. The academic calendar is a prime example of how institutions capitalize on Christian privilege. One could hardly fault universities for organizing the calendar around Christian holidays such as Christmas, considering it has developed into a major cultural holiday; however, "any campus that fails to formally acknowledge the existence of many non-Christian religious holidays is sending a subtle yet powerful ethnocentric message concerning which holidays are worth knowing about, and which ones are not" (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003, p. 32). This message reverberates through a university's actions or inactions as well. When public institutions decide to adorn the campus with Christmas trees and various other Christmas decorations, students may feel as though the university only values students from the Christian tradition. Campus leaders should reach out to the various faith traditions by sponsoring other holidays (holy - days), not just those practiced by the majority.

In order to create opportunities for students to explore what it means to value diversity in religious and spiritual traditions, institutions must design a structure that truly supports interfaith dialogue. Schlosser and Sedlacek (2003) suggested that universities should "distribute an annual calendar of religious holidays," "incorporate religious curricula into established diversity programs," "establish the position of 'coordinator of campus multifaith activities,'" and "ensure that campus policies, including final exam schedule[s], reflect religious diversity" (p. 32). By providing equal access for interaction with religiously diverse students in an environment free from judgment and endorsement of one religious tradition over another, institutions have the foundation to begin bridging the gap in understanding between students of different faith traditions.

Institutionalizing Religious Accommodations

When the students from diverse backgrounds attend the same institution, it is necessary for that institution to provide the appropriate accommodations sought by those students. Universities already provide such accommodations for students with disabilities and for international students. To preserve the religious heritage that many students subscribe to upon entering college, institutions should be prepared to offer the same types of accommodations that

are already present for other students. These accommodations could be as simple as providing space for student organizations to meet or for students to engage in prayer and meditation. However, for many religious students, accommodations for their beliefs can be much more personal and may not be under the institution's control.

For Muslim women, the issue of veiling raises an important point from which to open dialogue among students. While being a religious tenet that women chose to follow, "veiling in [the] college environment create[s] barriers in [students'] academic and social spheres, which affect[s] their sense of belonging in the educational community" (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, p. 65). Because other students do not understand why female students would subject themselves to a symbol of female oppression, Muslim women on campus are in effect shunned from what would normally be called a "typical college experience." Interestingly, when considering why they chose to veil, "students who feel coerced by alienating college experiences appear more likely to reinvestigate the purpose of the veil" (p. 65). These female students should not be made to feel as though they need to alter their embodiment of religious beliefs just because the campus culture does not agree or understand. By encouraging an open dialogue among students, institutions will in effect be supporting the rights of expression that religious believers deserve.

Another area for which institutions can have responsibility is providing meals in which any student, regardless of religious tenets, can partake. Particularly in Islamic and Jewish traditions, followers adhere to strict dietary laws that can be overlooked by student organizations as well as by dining halls and university receptions. Tomalin (2007) indicated, "the 'alcohol-led' student culture was cited as a cultural impediment to 'fitting in' for many students, as was the absence of *halaal* or *kosher* food at catering outlets, as well as social events" (p. 628). By providing environments that do not endorse one particular tradition over another, institutions sometimes fail to consider how students of a certain faith perceive those environments. Institutions may not think that, in organizing a reception for an honor society induction, they would need to consider how refreshment options would be perceived by religious cultures that are different from the mainstream.

Additionally, there is a concern that students from diverse religious backgrounds need educational environments that support their individual beliefs. Educators must develop an understanding of the various faith traditions that culturally are not supported in the U.S. higher education system. For example, in class environments that promote collaboration among students, "the reluctance of some students to work in mixed sex groups and ethical or cultural objections to course content...also raised difficulties for educators" (Tomalin, 2007, p. 628). In support of a model that promotes dialogue, educators should establish opportunities for students that encourage self-expression orally and in writing and does not endorse argument or debate (Shady & Larson, 2010). The reality for educators is that religious beliefs have a powerful impact on class discussion and student participation. Therefore, faculty

and staff members need to learn more about the differences in these religious cultures so that they can create a course framework that will emphasize equality and understanding.

Funding for Religious Student Organizations

Campus religious organizations are a prime outlet for students to associate with others who hold the same beliefs or even to explore dialogue between various groups. These groups, like many other student-run organizations, generally require funds to operate. For many campus organizations and clubs, this funding is distributed by the Student Government Association (SGA) or similar council. While this does not present a problem for most campus organizations, institutions fear supporting religious organizations because it suggests direct endorsement of that religion. This has led to institutional policies prohibiting religious organizations from receiving funds.

In June of 1995, the U.S. Supreme Court delivered its decision regarding *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia*. In the case, a Christian student organization claimed its constitutional rights were violated when the University refused to provide funds for their Christian newspaper on the grounds that it would be supporting religious activity (Jaschik, 1995). Siding with the student organization, the Court "approved of university support for a religious publication that was not directly affiliated with a church. At the same time, the Court stood by its long-time prohibition on direct support for a church" (Jaschik, 1995, para. 4). The implications of this decision are that institutions, particularly public institutions, are now responsible for ensuring that student-run religious organizations receive equal funding as long as those funds do not directly support a particular church or similar institution.

Additionally, colleges and universities must consider where they get their funding. Institutions of higher education are subject to federal statutes regarding discrimination, including Title IX and Title VI (Hamilton & Bentley, 2005). In order for them to continue to receive federal funding, these institutions must be sure that they, and any organizations associated with them (including student organizations), are following the discrimination provisions set forth by the federal government. While both statutes state that "a university may lose its federal funding if a student is subjected to discrimination in an educational program on the basis of certain traits such as sex, race, color, national origin, disability, or age" (Hamilton & Bentley, 2005, p. 621-622), there is no mention in either about a student being discriminated based on his or her religious views.

In a time of decreased state and federal financial support, institutions are also forcing budget cuts across the board. New programs that focus on interfaith dialogue may be seen as extraneous and offering little support as to their significance in the lives of students. Administrators would be more likely to cut these programs before they even start because the need for funding current programs outweighs the need to support a program that might not reach the entire student population. The general concern among students and university personnel is that the more an institution funds any

kind of religious activity, the less secular and liberal those institutions portray themselves to be. Some students and administrators might argue that religion has no place in the university whatsoever and that religious students should seek to attend private universities where those needs can be met more appropriately. However, with the cost of tuition increasing at a rate that few people can keep up with, as well as the increase of grants to attend public institutions, there is more incentive for students to attend a public university compared to a private institution. What then does this mean as far as a public institution addressing the religious and spiritual needs of those students?

Managing Religious Diversity in the Classroom

The question that faces higher education is how to maintain an environment of equality and acceptance in the face of various religious beliefs. Faculty and staff must also face this question in their classrooms.

> Many staff are concerned that they cannot teach effectively because they do not have sufficient knowledge about different cultures and religions. Others are worried that they may unwittingly discriminate against a student on cultural or religious grounds from a position of ignorance. (Tomalin, 2007, p. 622)

Because faculty members may not be prepared to teach students from diverse religious backgrounds, trying to establish a mode of dialogue between students and professors has become a real concern in higher education. Professors express their frustration with students who do not come into class with an open mind. How do you teach a fundamentalist Christian the theory of evolution when they adamantly believe the world was created as the Bible dictates?

In attempting to develop some sort of common ground, Shady and Larson (2010) suggested that "educators have a responsibility to find a proper balance between building open relations with students and respecting each student's personal autonomy by acknowledging their otherness" (p. 82). Furthermore, Shady and Larson (2010) argued that:

> Enabling genuine dialogue about diverse ideas requires a consideration of both the interpersonal dynamics of the relation between teacher and student, as well as the interpersonal dynamics of the pursuit of truth itself. This model of education promotes a shared reality where all partners in the dialogue come to understand each other's position, even if they do not entirely agree with it. (p. 83)

By challenging students to engage in dialogue, even about course topics, faculty members can at least attempt to reach out to those students. Under this model, there is no direct pressure on the student to discard his or her belief system. Educators have a responsibility to educate students, not evangelize and convert them to their way of thinking.

Another concern in higher education is that faculty members ultimately have the power to overstep their bounds. In trying to foster an environment where all religions are welcome and free from persecution, it is important to recognize the power that professors have in the course material they choose to highlight. Professors run the risk of proselytizing their views in favor of one tradition over another if they are not careful. Though many professors may do this inadvertently by

providing only one religious point of view on a topic, some may decide to take it to the extreme by stating that a particular religious tradition is the only belief system or the correct belief system.

Anti-Discrimination or Anti-Religion Policies?

Without a doubt, the most prominent obstacle in addressing religious diversity is the fear of violating the Establishment Clause of the Federal Constitution. This fear overshadows every decision that an institution makes regarding funding, accommodations, organization oversight and university programming. Not only does the institution have to be concerned with violating Constitutional rights, but it also must be aware of violating the anti-discrimination statutes discussed earlier. For administrators, "the secularization of education has also been a response to the growing acceptance of religious diversity in the U.S. populations. Yet the effect of secularization has been to deny the significance of the very foundation of religion" (Laurence, 1999, p. 11).

With regard to student organizations, administrators have final approval in whether or not an organization will be recognized by the institution. What remains to be seen is whether universities have the right to determine who can be members of those organizations or not. In 1972, the Supreme Court decided in the case of Healy v. James that just because a college president does not agree with the ideology of the organization does not mean that he or she can keep those students from exercising their first amendment right to association and be an organization on campus (Hamilton & Bentley, 2005). However, Hamilton and Bentley (2005) stated that:

> If a college can prove that the non-discrimination provision of its disciplinary code as applied to a potential student organization's selection of its members and officers is a 'reasonable campus law,' Healy seems to offer support that a university may enforce such a campus law. (p. 617)

What this means for student organizations is that if a university develops a policy that states, "No organization will discriminate based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation," all organizations will have to abide by that policy regardless of their religious creed. For example, if a Christian organization tries to keep gay or lesbian students from joining because the organization does not support homosexuality, the university can force them to include those students or threaten to remove university support from the organization. This brings up a controversy over allowing students to celebrate their traditions in such a way that emphasizes their autonomy. Subjecting student organizations to include students that do not follow the same ideology seems to be a negative way of achieving inter-group interaction.

Ultimately, university administrations have the authority to enforce anti-religious policies as they see fit. The concern is that by establishing those types of policies, institutions are creating an environment that seeks to maintain liberal secularization and not celebrate the diversity that exists among students in the most fundamental capacity—religion and spirituality. Focusing on the repercussions of allowing room for dialogue about religious beliefs "seriously undermines

[the] commitment to diversity and [the] ability to fulfill an important educational priority (that is, educating students about other religious traditions)" (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003, p. 31).

Conclusion and Implications

In a society that values objectivity, tolerance, and neutrality, religion has been shut away from college students as a viable means of self-expression. Public colleges and universities that should be concerned with the holistic development of the students they serve mostly ignore the importance that religion and spirituality play in the lives of students. Administrators do not have the resources available to educate themselves on the various religious traditions that are present on campus and are therefore ill prepared to serve the vast majority of students in this area of their development.

By providing a means to explore one's religion or spirituality, institutions can begin to bridge the divide that exists between faith traditions. In order to do that, colleges and universities must place interfaith dialogue first. Fostering an open and judgment-free environment where dialogue can flourish will lead to students learning from one another about other traditions and becoming not only tolerant of other faith traditions, but also inclusive of those traditions within their own experience.

Institutions of higher education have the deck stacked against them if they attempt to include religion and spirituality in student programming. Not only do these institutions have to fight for financial support from sources that also believe in religious and spiritual development, but they must be able to provide equal access to all traditions including students who may consider themselves atheists. While this may seem like an easy goal to accomplish, the reality is that most administrators and faculty members do not have the resources or education necessary to facilitate this development or these types of discussions with students. The fact remains that religion or spirituality is a vital element in the lives of most individuals, even if one might identify as atheist or agnostic. Since colleges and universities serve that same population of individuals, potential students will also practice certain religious beliefs or, at the very least, will be searching for a higher meaning and purpose in life. If the goal of higher education is to facilitate the education of the whole student, institutions would be remiss in fulfilling this goal if they did not factor in a student's religious or spiritual development as a mediating factor in the learning process.

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