Eboo Patel and Mary Ellen Giess note that higher education has done an admirable job of engaging issues of multiculturalism. They now challenge us to expand our efforts around religious diversity.

By Eboo Patel and Mary Ellen Giess

Engaging Religious Diversity on Campus: The Role of Student Affairs

In summer 2002, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was caught up in a firestorm. UNC-Chapel Hill had selected Michael Sells' Approaching the Qur'an as its first-year textbook, a decision that had sparked criticism across the state. Some argued that the decision violated church/state separation; others felt that the selection was outrageously pro-Islam given the September 11 attacks the previous year. The media attention grew as a lawsuit was officially filed against the university for violating the establishment clause and state politicians threatened to cut off funding to the university.

I (Mary Ellen) arrived on campus that fall as many first-year students do—excited, more than a little nervous, and completely oblivious to the complex issues playing out on campus. My experience with the book was amazing. Sells' beautiful Qur'anic translations and the companion audio disc cracked open a world that I did not know existed and I couldn't wait to share that experience with other students in my discussion group. On move-in day, however, my residence hall was surrounded by news trucks and all of the students buzzed about who had gotten interviewed and which of us would be on that evening news. My anticipation for the book discussion was heightened—what was all of this upheaval about? I wondered. Surely my discussion group would help me make sense of the controversy.

The conversation did not answer my questions. My resident advisor (RA) facilitator stuck close to the sanctioned script of discussion questions, focusing on student reflections of what they had learned by reading the book and interpreting the meaning of particular suras, or Qur'anic chapters. No one brought up the controversy, and no one discussed why the book was selected to begin with. Leaving the conversation, I felt even more confused. I knew that university leaders had stuck by their book selection under immense outside pressure, but I had no idea why or what I was supposed to make of their decision.

Multiculturalism in Student Affairs

Colleges and universities have often been at the vanguard of major social change movements. From the civil rights movement to environmentalism, campus faculty, staff, and administrators have taken their leadership role seriously in elevating priorities and shaping leaders to make a difference on matters...
of social import. Of particular influence for the two of us was the multiculturalism movement, which gave voice and authority to often underrepresented identity groups on campus. Paul Gorski of EdChange explains that following the major legislative victories of the civil rights movement in 1960s, a coalition of civil rights activists and scholars began working with national education institutions to infuse a more egalitarian perspective into institutions’ curriculum and practices. Women’s rights groups, gay and lesbian groups, and advocates of the elderly and people with disabilities joined the effort to push for transformative change in educational institutions, particularly within colleges and universities.

The student affairs field played a unique leadership role in operationalizing this ethic and embedding it into institutional practice. Student affairs practitioners established policies, built programs, developed trainings, and advocated for courses based on the principles of multiculturalism. We were the beneficiaries of this visionary leadership. For me (Eboo), as a South Asian Muslim, these programs were nothing short of transformative. I recall walking onto the basketball court at the Campus YMCA at the University of Illinois in the mid-1990s. There was a black game, a white game, and an Asian game on the court, and I instinctively walked towards the white game. As I strode across the court, a sudden realization hit me—I had been trying to walk into the white game for my entire life. This insight could have evaporated in the midst of daily collegiate experiences had it not been for the pervasiveness of multiculturalism that existed at U of I. From the orientation experience to required courses, from student clubs to residence hall programming, I was immersed in conversations of identity consciousness. These conversations gave me a powerful awareness of being able to name what it felt like to be a brown kid in a white world, of being able to find meaning and pride in my roots and identity. For me, identity consciousness was liberation, a liberation gifted by student affairs professionals on my campus.

But not all identities were equally understood. I remember a conversation that took place once I became an RA, when my fellow RAs and I were engaged in dialogue about our various identities and times we felt marginalized. Going around the circle, one woman shared a personal story of a time she felt ostracized because of her identity as a woman; a young man shared a time that he felt unsafe because of his identity as a gay man. With each story, the group nodded empathetically, connecting with the experience even if the identity was not a shared one across the group. The conversation lulled, and my friend Kizer Hussain spoke up. “I felt marginalized last week in the dining hall,” he began. “The group of students who got involved in the food fight felt very disrespectful to me. I’m a Muslim. As a Muslim, we believe that food is life and life is from God. You don’t violate that. Wasting food in that way was disrespectful to God and disrespectful to my religious beliefs.” What I remember most is the deafening silence around the room. There was no animosity there—the silence was not damning. Rather, it just felt blank. My fellow resident advisors simply had nothing to say, they were stunned into silence when someone had brought up their religious identity. Religion as an element of personal identity was simply not on their radar.

Both of our stories illustrate one powerful point: higher education, and the field of student affairs, has yet to reach its potential in positive engagement of religious and nonreligious identities. What brought us to this point? And, perhaps most importantly—what might it look like for the field of student affairs to engage religious identity with the same passion and purpose that it does other forms of identity? Given the impact student affairs has had as an advocate for many types of marginalized identities, the possibilities are truly manifold.

### A Historic Look at Religion in Higher Education

**THERE ARE REASONS THAT ENGAGING religious identity on campus has proved so elusive. Not long ago, many scholars argued that religion was no longer relevant. Academics such as Harvey Cox and Peter Berger published tomes on the inevitable decline of religion in the modern world. Tracing trend lines that seemed to indicate declining religious participation, they boldly hypothesized that as secular, so-called rationalist thinking rose, global religiosity would decline. The “secularization thesis,” first popularized**
in the 1960s, has been dramatically retracted by these same scholars who promoted it. Research from the Pew Research Center in 2012 demonstrates that religiosity continues to flourish throughout the world, and global conflict continues to be fraught with religious implications. Further, that religiosity has continued to diversify, even the rise of individuals identifying as nonreligious has interesting implications for religious diversity given that those who use that language often mean very different things. Put bluntly, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the “secularization thesis” did not hold. “We made a category mistake,” Peter Berger is quoted as saying in “O come all ye faithful,” an article in The Economist in 2007. “We thought the relationship was between modernization and secularization. In fact it was between modernization and pluralism.” Berger’s comment recognizes that our modern religious landscape is one of increasing diversity, rather than increasing secularism.

Despite the sociological realities of religious belief and participation, both domestically and abroad, American higher education pursued a model of religious privatization. As Doug and Rhonda Jacobsen have demonstrated in No Longer Invisible, while American college campuses were often founded with religious roots, institutions of higher education increasingly construed religion as an inherently private phenomenon throughout the 20th century, intentionally separating religious belief and identity from campus life. There were a variety of reasons for this approach, including the pervasiveness of the secularization thesis as well as an increasingly secular conception of academic research. As a result of this view, conversations about religion and religious identity were excluded from the classroom experience on campus. As the historian George Marsden put it, “nonbelief” became the established norm of higher education.

This norm of “nonbelief” in higher education poses a persistent challenge to engaging religion and religious identity on campuses. Nevertheless, a number of leaders have made strides in promoting the importance of engaging religion in the higher education context. In the 1990s and early 2000s, groups of college professors and campus chaplains began organizing—and publishing—on this important issue. Chaplains like Janet Cooper Nelson at Brown initiated proactive co-curricular efforts to facilitate interfaith interaction. Victor Kazanjian, then chaplain at Wellesley, started a national network called Education as Transformation that provided resources and networking opportunities for leaders in the field. Researchers like Sandy and Helen Astin at University of California—Los Angeles undertook the Spirituality in Higher Education research project that emphatically demonstrated the importance of spiri-


tual seeking and exploration among college students. Scholars such as Sharon Daloz Parks, Arthur Chickering, Jon C. Dalton, and Liesa Stamm provided critical research and frameworks for student affairs practitioners seeking to incorporate spirituality and meaning-making into the student learning experience.

The Ongoing Importance of Engaging Religion

TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE EFFORTS PRESENT critical contributions in breaking down barriers and providing models for engaging religion in higher education. And yet, difficulties with religion remain in both quotidian and newsworthy ways. In fact, as we observe the current dynamics around religion on the local and national scene, we believe that it is time for an enhanced, integrated approach to engaging religion and secular worldview, one that is deliberately high priority and cross-campus in influence. We must be candid about the risks we run if we do not rise to this challenge:

- **We risk not adequately meeting student needs.** As the landscape of religious diversity evolves, we continue to hear requests from students around religious accommodation—Muslims requesting footbath facilities so they can pray on campus, Jewish students requesting Shabbat-friendly residence halls and kosher dining options, secular students requesting formal recognition as a student group at some religiously affiliated institutions. Each of these requests is akin to similar requests for accommodation and recognition by other identity groups in years past. Yet, campuses engage these religious and nonreligious requests with varying levels of success. A stronger vision of interfaith cooperation as a campus priority would mean attending to these needs in a more proactive way.

- **We risk failing to prepare students for lives in a religiously diverse world.** Global religious diversity is flourishing, and the professional and civic communities our students will join after graduation will reflect that diversity. The Association of American Colleges and University’s 2015 employer survey demonstrated that 96 percent of future employers agree, “all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views differ from their own.” However, surveys show that Americans still carry considerable prejudice towards a variety of religious groups. Gallup research reported by Jeffrey M. Jones in 2012 shows that over 43 percent of Americans
say they wouldn’t vote for an atheist for president and Pew data from 2010 demonstrates that 35 percent of Americans believe that Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions. A whitpaper by the Interfaith Youth Core reports that 44 percent of minority religious students (i.e., students who have a religious identity other than Christian) reported that they “sometimes” hear insensitive comments about their worldview from peers on campus. This bias is not limited to informal campus environments—Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) published a white paper in 2014 based on research with Alyssa Rockenbach and Matt Mayhew that shows 42 percent of students surveyed felt “moderately,” “slightly,” or “not at all” safe in the classroom when it comes to engaging religion. Building relationships across religious difference is going to be a reality for students, and we owe it to them to prepare them for that reality.

- We risk ongoing conflicts around religious identity in our campus communities. Arguably even more concerning is the elevated role that religiously implicated conflict plays in our national events and discourse. Looking back at our own alma mater, it is clear that our campus experiences of difficulty around religion were not aberrations. The University of Illinois became mired in debate regarding Chancellor Patricio Wise’s decision to prevent academic Stephen Salaite from assuming an offered faculty position in fall 2014. Salaite had undergone a routine hiring process for a faculty appointment in the American Indian Studies program. The summer prior to his move to Urbana, conflict escalated in the Middle East which precipitated heated pro-Palestinian commentary by Salaite on Twitter. According to an article by Scott Jaschik in Inside Higher Ed, Wise, prompted by several external campus complaints, contacted Salaite to notify him that she would not be putting his position up for approval to the Board of Trustees—in other words, his job offer no longer stood. A News-Gazette article by Christine Des Garennes, quoted Wise as stating that, the university cannot tolerate “personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them.” The ensuing—and ongoing—outrage around this situation was tumultuous, with various stakeholders weighing in passionately, including the American Association of University Professors, the U of I Board of Trustees, and numerous scholars nationally who have boycotted the institution. While there are many critical questions raised by this situation, the religious dynamics at play here are clear—what right do faculty have to voice their political and religious perspectives on campus? How can faculty voice those perspectives while maintaining safe space for their students, who may claim different identities? What role should institutions play in creating space for proactive and productive conversations around issues that divide us, while maintaining loyalty to communal commitments? Without engaging these questions forthrightly, our institutions will continue to face significant challenges in these arenas.

- We risk missing educational opportunities for our students around religion. In Chapel Hill, tragedy struck when three Muslim students, Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu-Salha, and Razan Abu-Salha, were targeted and murdered by Craig Hicks in February 2014. By all reports, these three individuals were everything we hope for from today’s college students. They were active in their communities, dedicated to serving others locally and internationally, and launching an exciting professional future for themselves. Margaret Talbot’s profile of the case in The New Yorker explains how Hicks, a neighbor of Deah and Yusor and a self-identified “anti-theist” who wanted “religion to go away,” engaged in an ongoing dispute with the students about parking in their Chapel Hill apartment complex. While the mainstream media deliberated on whether there actually were religious implications to this triple murder, the reality was, to us, quite clear. It seems difficult to believe that the preponderance of Islamophobia in our society did not contribute to Hicks’ motivation for this crime. In a time when the idea that Shari’a law is invading American cities goes viral on the Internet, when ISIS is often equated with the entirety of Islam, we find it difficult to believe that Hicks carried out his crime in isolation of these national narratives. While the crime did not happen on campus at UNC-Chapel Hill, as a critical contributor to the local community, the campus no doubt has a responsibility to support students in this grieving process and to understand the real issues at stake in this tragic incident. In the same way campuses help students examine the recent slate of police violence against African Americans, so campuses should help students process the ways that Islamophobic rhetoric (and other prejudicial and hate speech against religious and nonreligious identities) contributes to violence in their own communities and the world.
A Vision for Engaging Religious Identity and Diversity in Student Affairs

THE RISKS WE RUN BY failing to adequately engage religious identity and diversity are even more evident when we see the variety of campuses dealing with conflict around this topic—the Rachel Beyda case at UCLA, the Duke controversy around the Muslim adhan (the call to prayer), the new all-comers policies, Anti-Defamation League’s reports of increases in Anti-Semitic incidents, the “blood bucket challenge” at Ohio University. Examining these trends, it is clear that engaging student spirituality is deeply important, but practitioners must also go further to develop respect and engagement across difference. What our campuses and nation truly need are educational experiences focused on appreciative knowledge and respect. Furthermore, campuses must find ways to create community and give their students the skills to create community, which means learning how to build relationships across lines of difference, anchored by core communal commitments. Campus leaders across institutions struggle to call upon the skills to build bridges in times of discord. Is it any wonder that students struggle with this as well? The question, then, becomes: what ought the field of student affairs do in, as Diana Eck has stated, the most religiously diverse nation in human history, the most religiously devout nation in the West, at a time of global and local religious tension? What should the field that shapes thousands of college campuses and millions of college students do to engage issues of religious identity and diversity?

Let us propose that the field of student affairs ought to have the same proactive, powerful vision around faith and philosophical issues as it does around race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality. We are not arguing that religious identity is more important than these other categories. Rather, we are arguing that they are part of the same constellation of intersecting identities. The field of student affairs has blazed trail after trail of successful engagement of various kinds of identity, from gender and sexuality to race and ethnicity. We believe that religious identity deserves the same kind of attention. This means the same type of awareness, the same focus on developing skills to engage these identities (among faculty, staff, and students), the same dedication to research in this area, and the same focus on achieving student learning in these areas. And we believe that now is the time for student affairs to take up this critical area with vigor.

What are some of the arguments against this? In our work at IFYC, we are fortunate enough to spend a good deal of time on college campuses. We often hear two themes from campus partners in response to our claim that student affairs must be more proactive around religious identity and diversity. First, we often hear that religious diversity brings significant new challenges. Many student affairs practitioners feel that they lack a depth of knowledge about the variety of world religions, they are wary about blowback from campus stakeholders (students, alumni, and donors), or they are apprehensive about church/state issues. Our response is simple. The field of student affairs has not been intimidated by taking on difficult issues in the past. Issues of race, gender identity, and sexuality are all minefields fraught with their own distinct challenges. And yet, the field recognized that people were being marginalized and made a commitment to tackle these challenges head on. If it’s important, the field of student affairs has historically committed to addressing it.

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Secondly, we often hear that there are dimensions of religion that make student affairs professionals uncomfortable. At a student affairs conference several years ago, the Chief Diversity Officer of a major state university approached us. She understood and appreciated our call to engage religion. However, she argued, some religious identities are out of step with the values of the campus and further, out of step with her own personal values. These religious communities do not accept other forms of identity that the campus welcomes. For example, some evangelical Christian students do not welcome LGBTQ students. She was genuinely struggling—she wanted to welcome her evangelical students, but their beliefs were at odds with her and her office’s stated values. We understand and empathize with this challenge. However, that evangelical student’s religious identity is no less important than the gay student’s sexual identity. Both of these identity categories are valuable and important.
to the campus community, despite the fact that they may, at times, be at odds with one another. Further, on many college campuses, the religious identity is often the marginalized identity—it may be more acceptable to be gay than evangelical Christian within certain campus communities.

In many ways, the very nature of diverse identities means that identities will, at times, be at tension with one another. This is not only true of religious identities—ethnic identities and racial identities are often in conflict with one another as well. This is simply part of the beauty and challenge of dealing with diversity. The question is, how do our campuses create spaces for these individuals to not only coexist, but also build respect and relationships with one another? How do we teach our students to be bridge-builders, both on campus and beyond? How do we teach our students that celebrating diversity means not only celebrating the differences that we like, but also learning to engage fairly with the differences that we don’t like? Many times, this challenge applies as much to ourselves as to our students.

**Taking Action around Religious Identity and Diversity**

**IF, AS WE ARE SUGGESTING,** the field of student affairs were to build a vision of the proactive engagement of religious identity and diversity, what might that look like? We believe that successful engagement of this work will require student affairs professionals to exhibit competency in the following areas. While this framework may not be comprehensive, we believe it offers a starting place for the field in beginning to address religious identity more proactively on both the individual and the institutional level.

1. **All student affairs practitioners should be able to sensitively engage religious and nonreligious identities.** On the individual level, this means that campus staff should have the ability to discuss religious identity around spiritual development or religious accommodation. Across the campus, this means that institutional leaders should consider policies and spaces that create welcoming environments for diverse religious and nonreligious backgrounds. Sensitive engagement also involves knowing about and utilizing expert resources, including religious life professionals, in support of students.

2. **All student affairs practitioners should have the ability to facilitate positive interaction between diverse religious and nonreligious identities.** Identities are likely to come into conflict with one another, and campus staff should have the ability to navigate those conflicts with a focus on building positive relationships. Again, this manifests on the individual and institutional level—campus staff should be able to navigate tensions between students and also consider ways to develop structures to promote positive relationship building.

3. **All student affairs practitioners should have a positive and proactive agenda around engaging religious diversity and identity.** In the same way student affairs has elevated the priority of social justice and integrated that vision in large and small ways on campuses, so should campus leaders establish an agenda—with concrete programming and training plans—to increase interfaith cooperation on campus.

This is a lofty goal, with no singular pathway to success. What steps might individuals—and the field—take to begin to achieve this vision? The following action items articulate concrete opportunities to operationalize the vision articulated above.

**Establish Competencies**

For issues of importance to student affairs, field leaders take the time to identify baseline expectations for how practitioners at varying levels ought to comport themselves. At the highest level, professional associations often articulate these competencies for the field; however, practitioners do not need to limit themselves to waiting for national guidance. Individual institutions can take the time to articulate expectations for
themselves and their staff, considering what ideal behaviors, knowledge, and skills are needed to successfully engage religious identity and diversity at a given institution. Our framework of religious pluralism is one starting place; Michael M. Kocet and Dafina-Lazarus Stewart have also taken the lead in articulating some of these competencies for student affairs practitioners in the Journal of College & Character.

Build the Knowledge and Skill Base

As competencies are articulated, campus leaders can begin identifying mechanisms to support professional development in achieving these desired goals. Training and knowledge development can take place on the individual level, department level, campus wide, or even across institutions. University of Vermont hosted IPYC for a student affairs division-wide professional development day, focusing on practical skill-building and training to heighten their staff’s capacity. Berea College facilitated interfaith training workshops for all student paraprofessionals, including multicultural student leaders, residence hall advisors, and religious life staff. Professional development opportunities of all kind—one off, annual, and national—can be planned in support of this work.

Develop a Research Base

Developing a theoretical base for practical use is critical to ensuring that interfaith learning is impact-driven. Matt Mayhew and Alyssa Rockenbach are leading scholars who are contributing substantially to the research base in this area. IPYC is pleased to be partnering with Mayhew and Rockenbach on the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), a longitudinal study that seeks to better understand student encounters with religious, spiritual, and worldview diversity across the spectrum of American higher education. We have already published several articles and reports based on previous survey data gathered by our partnership. However, more research on effective interfaith learning practices is needed. This research base will be an invaluable contribution to bolstering the level of rigor for interfaith work.

Use Existing Models

As noted previously, interfaith work is happening on campuses across the country. This means that successful program models exist, and your regional and national colleagues can be resources in developing a model that works for your institution. The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, a White House program which calls on institutions of higher education to advance interfaith service, is one network through which you can learn about existing models. Ross Wantland, Director of Diversity & Social Justice Education at the University of Illinois, proactively supports his students’ interfaith programming efforts. One of their major annual events is the Illinois Campus Interfaith Conference (ICIC), which brings together regional institutions to share their experiences in interfaith action. Look to assets in your own institution first, such as religious life professionals or existing interfaith groups, and then get connected with national networks and colleagues on other campuses to learn how the work is being undertaken and start to formulate plans. IFTC seeks to be a clearinghouse of effective on-campus programming, and we would be delighted to be a support as your campus begins this endeavor.

Assess Your Impact

Whether you’re brand new to interfaith work or a seasoned veteran, assessing impact is critical to success. Consider the goals you are trying to achieve and look for meaningful opportunities to track progress against them. Dominican University established campus-wide interfaith learning outcomes that will be utilized in the campus accreditation process. Tarah Trueblood, Director of the Interfaith Center at the University of North Florida, compiled evaluative surveys for all of her interfaith student programming. Regardless of its scale, impact data helps you understand if your programs are achieving their goals, provides meaningful validation for your work, and generates useful data to improve programming in the future.

Above all, the best advice we can offer is to get started. Whether it’s developing interfaith literacy, planning skill-building opportunities, visioning research agendas, integrating assessment practices, or simply planning an interfaith program—each of these steps are critical components to the field of student affairs articulating a priority around religious diversity and putting that vision into action.

Imagining the Potential

THE LAUNCH OF THE PRESIDENT’S Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge captured Atawanna Royal’s interest. Royal, Assistant Director of Campus Life at Clayton State University, envisioned the possibilities of this program as a way to mobilize student leaders. In her mind, student leadership should be at the heart of interfaith work. Over the past three years, Royal built the Interfaith Leadership Ambassadors Program (ILAP), which trains 15 students each semester to run interfaith service events, dialogue sessions, and panel events. Upon completion,
the students sit on the We Are O.N.E. Interfaith Council at Clayton State, and serve as representatives for the importance of interfaith cooperation on campus. For Royal, this program is the perfect embodiment of higher education’s values around civic engagement. “Religion has moved to the forefront of diversity,” Royal shared with the IFYC team, “I hope that students will gain skills and experience that will equip them to succeed in our global society while impacting the lives of others.” Royal found a way to engage individual student identities, put students in relationship with one another, and leverage student energies to advance a proactive agenda for interfaith cooperation on campus.

Imagine the possibilities of a program like this on campuses across the country. Imagine the possibilities if each student affairs practitioner found ways to move

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this issue to the forefront of their and their students’ consciousness. Imagine a society marked by individuals with the ability to engage religious identity and diversity positively and productively.

If the field of student affairs won’t do it, who will?

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