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Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence in Higher Education

P E R S P E C T I V E S

THE RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS of higher education are changing rapidly. College campuses have become prime sites for conflicts involving religious identity. Many such stories have made national news—polarizing debates about Israel/Palestine, frustration by campus religious groups regarding “all comers” policies, the emergence of a strand of atheism that is overtly hostile to religion.¹ Furthermore, the religious demographics of student bodies across the country

have shifted drastically, even at religiously affiliated schools. Take Augsburg College as an example. Founded as the first higher education institution of what would become the Evangelical

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Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg is today reflective of the broad diversity of its home city of Minneapolis. President Paul Pribbenow has observed that Augsburg College is located in the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Los Angeles. The student body includes members of the local Somali Muslim, Hmong, and Native American communities; students of color constitute 30 percent of the student body, and Lutherans only 20 percent.

Such dynamics are only one dimension of what Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen call “pluriform religion” in their recent book, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*. They claim that the era in which religion was privatized

and went unengaged on campuses is coming to an end. The combination of increased religious diversity on campuses, the embrace of multiculturalism by higher education more broadly, and the visibility of religious controversy in global politics has made the proactive and positive engagement of interfaith issues a necessity. The Jacobsens explain that “paying attention to religion in higher education today is not at all a matter of imposing faith or morality on anyone; it is a matter of responding intelligently to the questions of life that students find themselves necessarily asking as they try to make sense of themselves and the world in an era of ever-increasing social, intellectual and religious complexity.”²

As part of its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has set the standard for liberal education in the twenty-first century: “Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change . . . [in] the wider world . . . [and] helps students develop a sense of social responsibility.”³ Few issues touch more broadly or more deeply on complexity, diversity, and change in the twenty-first-century world than those related to how people who orient differently around religion interact with one another. Interfaith cooperation in higher education thus ought not to be the pet project of a handful of colleagues who attend niche gatherings; rather, as the Jacobsens argue, it is one of the keys to fulfilling higher education’s mission as a social institution that nurtures leaders and enriches a diverse body politic. Given these stakes, knowing what leads to excellent campus-based interfaith engagement is important for ensuring that American colleges and universities deliver on the enduring goals of liberal education itself.

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Higher education is well equipped to take on this charge. America's college campuses have long set the educational and civic agenda for the nation on issues such as multiculturalism, volunteerism, and environmentalism. College campuses are social laboratories where a range of interfaith strategies can be tested; faculty can help create the necessary knowledge base to support and guide interfaith engagement, and higher education can make it a priority to nurture interfaith leaders, much as it has done with multicultural leaders. Of course, many college campuses have been doing some version of this on an ad hoc basis for many years. Chaplains and deans of religious life have worked to accommodate the spiritual needs of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, humanist, and other minority traditions. Students have launched interfaith clubs and councils. Courses focusing

hundred campuses, and partnered with twenty-five campuses on in-depth engagement consultations. In sifting through this experience in the field, it is possible to discern patterns of effectiveness. Notwithstanding the particularities of individual institutional contexts, there are clear commonalities among the most successful campus efforts—what we have come to call the “leadership practices for interfaith excellence in higher education.”

It is worth noting that the articulation of these practices is not the result of a rigorous study of interfaith work in higher education. Such a study is actually being launched (see below), but the results are several years away. Instead, compiled here are the insights of three experienced practitioners who work at Interfaith Youth Core and have partnered with practitioners on campuses across the country. Consequently, the best way to approach the practices described below is as a set of hypotheses to be tested and analyzed.

Eboo Patel,
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on interactions between different religious identities have emerged in a variety of departments, and faculty have written scholarly works on the subject.

As this type of activity grows, it is useful to ask what strategies, or combinations of strategies, are most effective in interfaith work. In other words, what does excellence look like when it comes to the engagement of religious diversity on a college or university campus? Is it possible to identify best

Leadership practices for interfaith excellence

Presented below are brief synopses of nine “leadership practices” that have emerged from Interfaith Youth Core’s experience, along with a brief example of how each has been embedded within a campus in the IFYC network. Since the practices are intentionally aspirational, the examples chosen do not necessarily represent the highest form of the practice; rather, they are meant to be illustrative.

The practices overlap to varying degrees, but two themes are clear across all nine. First, each of these practices is most effective when pursued with a commitment to both *breadth* (large percentages of the campus community having at least minimal exposure) and *depth* (select groups of the community having the opportunity to explore these issues in detail). Second, none of the practices is a “stand-alone”; they are best pursued in some combination. Campuses ought to start where they have existing strengths and positive energy, and grow from there.

1. *Establishing links to institutional identity and mission.* To promote effective campus engagement with religious diversity, it is essential that the priority of interfaith cooperation be directly linked to the institution’s mission, values, and identity. A campus might consider how the institution’s religious or historical identity makes salient the need for interfaith cooperation. Students should know that part of the institution’s mission is to graduate global and civic leaders who

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practices, analogous to the “LEAP high-impact practices” identified by AAC&U,⁴ that could be used as benchmarks or to orient future strategic planning in this area?

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a Chicago-based nonprofit organization, began working with colleges and universities on interfaith programs after the events of September 11, 2001. Since then, the organization has partnered with over four hundred institutions on interfaith programming, hosted over three hundred campus delegations at interfaith leadership institutes, provided speakers to give keynote addresses on one

have had experience with interfaith cooperation and have developed interfaith literacy.

For example, the President's Interfaith Advisory Council at Concordia College has crafted a Lutheran identity statement, which says that "Concordia College practices interfaith cooperation because of its Lutheran dedication to prepare thoughtful and informed global citizens who foster wholeness and hope, cultivate peace through understanding, and serve the world together." The statement links interfaith cooperation directly to Concordia's mission as a Lutheran college and explicitly defines the college's commitment. The Lutheran identity statement helps faculty, staff, students, and friends of the college understand that Concordia is committed to interfaith cooperation *because of*, not *in spite of*, its Lutheran identity.

2. *Developing a campus-wide strategy.* An individual college or university's plan for promoting interfaith engagement flows from its mission and guides the campus as it tries to live into its vision across the curriculum and cocurriculum. The creation of internal guiding documents—vision statements, strategic plans, statements of campus-wide learning goals—is a key way to demonstrate that interfaith cooperation is an institutional priority. A campus might, for example, make it a goal to increase the religious diversity of the student body, convene a cross-campus interfaith cooperation committee made up of a range of stakeholders, or identify and measure campus-wide learning outcomes for all students. No matter the goal, the strategic integration of the curricular and the cocurricular fosters educational experiences that are likely to have a significant impact on students.

Elon University's intentional, layered plan for multi-faith engagement is exemplary in this regard. Embedded within the first theme of "The Elon Commitment," the university's strategic plan, is a commitment to "build a multi-faith center and promote interfaith dialogue." With respect to the creation of a center, the planning process was led by a special "religious houses and multi-faith center" committee. Additionally, a team of staff and faculty recently completed a new strategic plan specifically to guide the work of the center and the broader campus initiative. As a result, Elon has a clear roadmap for achieving its goals related to multi-faith engagement.

3. *Creating a public identity.* A campus's public interfaith identity complements its internal

strategy. External communications and marketing materials can be used to highlight interfaith initiatives, and they should represent people from an array of religious backgrounds. In addition, high-profile community events focused on interfaith cooperation and public relations opportunities, such as the invitation of religiously diverse convocation speakers and the award of honorary degrees to religiously diverse recipients, convey the campus's priorities to external constituents.

Loyola University Chicago's recent "a home for all faiths" marketing campaign exemplifies this practice. The university used eye-catching advertisements—displayed on busses and kiosks across the city—to express its commitment to a religiously diverse student body, thereby encouraging students from many backgrounds to apply for admission. The slogan "a home for all faiths" appeared in large print across the city, letting locals know that Loyola might be a place for them, whether they're Catholic or not. This very public statement about Loyola's commitment to inclusion helps the university sustain its inclusive and religiously diverse campus community.

4. *Respecting and accommodating diverse religious identities.* The foundation for interfaith programming rests on both respect for the religious (or nonreligious) identity of all members of the community and reasonable accommodations related to how individuals live out their traditions in daily life. To this end, it is important that campus policies be instituted that address issues of religious accommodation, that strides be taken to communicate these policies, and that procedures be established by which new requests can be made and addressed. Many campuses have recognized the need to build multiple or multipurpose prayer spaces to accommodate the increasing diversity of religious expression, as well as to establish dining options that meet students' dietary needs.

Utah Valley University is a public institution with more than thirty thousand students, 80 percent of whom are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The university recently opened an interfaith reflection center in the heart of its campus. Faculty and staff had seen students—mostly Muslim students—praying in bathrooms and other corners of the campus, and knew a welcoming

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public space was necessary if they were to be honest about meeting the needs of their student body. Therefore, Utah Valley's president, himself a member of the LDS church, approved a new wellness building on the condition that it include a space that would be open to students of all faith traditions. This interfaith reflection center demonstrates the university's commitment to respecting and accommodating the full array of students' religious identities.

5. *Making interfaith cooperation an academic priority.* Increasingly, scholars from a variety of disciplines are recognizing the importance of interfaith cooperation as a subject of academic research, analysis, and instruction. Many colleges and universities have launched courses and course sequences in interfaith studies that are designed to train students to examine the mul-

multiple dimensions of interactions among individuals and groups who orient around religion differently and the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics. In addition

to supporting scholarly pursuits, the investment of institutional resources in faculty development—focused on the pedagogy of this nascent field as well as responding to the dynamics of a religiously diverse classroom—is an important component of this practice.

Dominican University exemplifies a broad and deep approach to this leadership practice. Since 2011, Dominican has required all first-year and sophomore students to read an interfaith-themed text in their liberal arts and sciences seminars. This means that texts presenting a variety of religious viewpoints—*Living Buddha, Living Christ* by Thich Nacht Hahn and *Encountering God* by Diana Eck—are read across disciplines and from multiple perspectives. In addition to these common seminar texts, faculty in the theology department are preparing to launch an interfaith studies minor. This multipronged approach ensures that Dominican students can access interfaith theory and concepts in multiple ways across the curriculum.

6. *Building competence and capacity among staff and faculty members.* Professional staff members and faculty do much to shape the campus climate and the student experience. Staff and faculty development opportunities, staff and faculty understanding of interfaith issues and religious diversity among the student body, and staff positions dedicated to interfaith cooperation—

all can contribute to a positive climate for people of diverse religious identities.

Berea College has been supporting interfaith student engagement and student leadership for many years. A desire to reach more students and make the commitment more sustainable led Berea to equip key staff people across student life. Student life personnel were asked to train resident assistants, student chaplains, service-learning leaders, and others in interfaith cooperation and how to engage religious diversity. In addition to providing structured workshops and training sessions, the approach helped the staff members involved to increase their fluency and comfort in engaging religious diversity and interfaith cooperation more broadly.

7. *Encouraging student leadership.* Higher education movements lack “legs” if students are not committed or invested, and young interfaith leaders do not emerge unless they have civic spaces within which to develop. Campus structures that support interfaith student leadership also contribute to effective student learning, promote program sustainability, and ensure that a variety of opportunities are available to students interested in interfaith leadership.

The interfaith scholars program at DePaul University exemplifies campus efforts to encourage interfaith student leadership. Scholars are chosen through a competitive application process and are representative of the student body in a number of ways, including in terms of religious diversity. Once selected, they are asked to develop their own interfaith leadership skills, build intentional relationships with one another, facilitate activities and programs for their peers, and reflect on their learning and growth. The scholars host regular dialogues and discussions that can engage hundreds of students.

8. *Engaging in campus-community partnerships.* Effective interfaith engagement requires practice, in addition to theoretical knowledge. Often, practice occurs beyond the boundaries of a campus in the form of service-learning experiences, internships, off-campus study, or other experiential education opportunities that engage students in interfaith civic engagement. These opportunities are most sustainable and effective when they draw on intentional and mutually beneficial relationships between the campus and local religious or civic organizations.

Elizabethtown College is attuned to this practice in all aspects of its cocurricular interfaith work. The college chaplains lead off-campus

Higher education movements lack “legs” if students are not committed or invested

visits to sacred spaces and faith-based spring break service trips, and provide guidance and advising to Elizabethtown's service-focused "Better Together" interfaith student group. In addition, Elizabethtown students may be selected as undergraduate fellows in ethical leadership, a program that emphasizes interfaith leadership. The fellows focus on networking, integrating life and work, and reflecting on experiences such as internships and volunteer service. Through these efforts, Elizabethtown is leveraging community relationships in order to help students take their interfaith leadership into "real life."

9. *Assessing campus climates and interfaith initiatives.* Interfaith cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon and, accordingly, intentional analysis and assessment are required to determine outcomes and goals, best practices, and efficacy. Campus climates and interfaith initiatives should be assessed regularly, and the findings should be used to guide ongoing improvement and strategic planning. Those involved in efforts to promote interfaith cooperation should never stop asking, "What are we trying to achieve, and how do we know whether what we are doing is having the intended effect?"

A rigorous scholarly assessment of interfaith effectiveness and experience is currently being launched. Developed by Matt Mayhew of New York University and Alyssa Rockenbach of North Carolina State University, the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is a five-year study of interfaith strategies in higher education. The initiative will include over 150 participating campuses—a broad cross-section of American higher education—and will survey students at three points in their college careers: at the start of the first year, after the first year, and at the end of the college experience. The purpose of the study is to discern the impact that campus programs and student experiences have on key interfaith outcomes, such as knowledge about different traditions and attitudes toward religiously diverse people. IDEALS will provide data about individual campuses, particular segments within higher education (large public universities in the Midwest, for example), and higher education as a whole.

Conclusion

As University of La Verne President Deborah Lieberman often remarks as she considers the growing interfaith work on her own campus, "This

isn't rocket science. It's harder." There is no silver bullet or single programmatic prescription that can guarantee interfaith excellence. Developing a campus culture of religious pluralism is painstaking, long-term work. Our hope is that the leadership practices described above will offer campus practitioners a useful framework for implementing their own interfaith goals and aspirations.

While the above list, as stated earlier, should be regarded as a set of hypotheses compiled by experienced practitioners, we would like to emphasize that there is a profound benefit for the broader society when colleges and universities embrace and apply these leadership practices as part of a liberal education. Campuses are positioned to serve as laboratories for interfaith cooperation, to make interfaith cooperation a broader civic priority, to nurture a generation of interfaith leaders, and to advance a knowledge base that can help society engage religious diversity. The Jacobsens' articulate this hope well: "The future of the world depends on people of differing faiths developing the capacity to cooperate and work with each other, and American higher education can have a significant part in building that capacity."⁵ □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Laurie Goodstein, "Members of Jewish Student Group Test Permissible Discussion on Israel," *New York Times*, December 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/us/members-of-jewish-student-group-test-permissible-discussion-on-israel.html>;
2. Michael Paulson, "Colleges and Evangelicals Collide on Bias Policy," *New York Times*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/10/us/colleges-and-evangelicals-collide-on-bias-policy.html>.
3. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30.
4. "What Is a 21st Century Liberal Education?," Association of American Colleges and Universities, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>.
5. "High Impact Educational Practices," Association of American Colleges and Universities, accessed December 3, 2014, <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>.
5. Jacobsen and Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible*, 91.

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