



On offices for RSSIs

Higher education provides administrative oversight and advocacy for those entities and identities it sees as valuable. In the evolution of a system which includes dozens of offices within a co-curricular realm, higher education now considers the whole identity and experience of the student when creating staff roles. This new staffing model has included the creation of many offices and positions which support specific campus affiliations, including Greek Life, and many areas of individual and collective identity, such as LGBTQIA+ Centers, Women's Centers, Multicultural Centers, Disability Services, and others. Yet, institutions have often ignored religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs), either closing offices that advocate for various RSSI groups or simply failing to create offices and staffing roles to support this area of identity.

Offices as a form of overcoming white Christian privilege on campus

The reorganization and establishment of offices, positions, and general institutional structures and resources can be an effective method for dismantling longstanding forms of white Christian privilege, as well as demonstrate overtly the values of institutions to providing an inclusive climate for diverse campus community. This can be accomplished by considering the following:

1. Reexamining the belief in “secularism” as an argument to not include RSSIs as a part of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work;
2. Include secular and non-religious students in the work of offices supporting RSSIs;
3. Evaluating and realigning models of chaplaincy in private institutions with more inclusive pedagogies;
4. Considering the reconfiguring or establishing of offices in support of RSSIs at public universities; and
5. Placing RSSIs offices within institutional structures to have influence in all aspects of campus climate and adequately resourcing them to meet community needs.

On overcoming the de facto belief in “secularism”

Higher education institutions have often adopted a de facto belief in “secularism” in regard to RSSIs. Occasionally, the concept of supporting RSSIs on campus causes confusion because of the American idea of separation of church and state. However, if religious support services are just one element of the many students receive, there is not necessarily any conflict between church and state. The one exception to this would be if a state-funded institution established an “official” religion on campus or allowed one religious or non-religious group to dominate the others on campus.

On including secular and non-religious students

The role of these offices varies among institutions, but generally they provide students with access to clergy and/or advisors, as well as opportunities to create student organizations, establish prayer and study groups, and provide service to the larger community. Very few institutions have comparable offices and staff for students who do not participate in formal religious traditions. Convergence believes that offices should be created or reorganized to include non-religious students. These offices will thus fulfill missing elements of higher education diversity and inclusion: that of a staff and an



administrative function which legally and ethically support all student RSSIs.

On current models of chaplaincy

Many private universities in the United States employ chaplains and deans of religious life who fulfill spiritual leadership or administrative roles within the institution. Depending on the institution, these positions are often highly regulated by longstanding institutional values and trends requiring Protestant or Catholic affiliation to serve in the role. Non-Christians are infrequently considered for leadership roles within these offices, even if institutions no longer affiliate with their original Christian denominations. Universities should take into consideration a wider understanding of how chaplaincy offices reinforce white Christian privilege, instead seeking more minoritized voices as leaders of institutional offices. The use of the term “chaplain” itself should be reconsidered in an examination of classism and Christian hegemony, with new titles being designated for both the office and the role. Finally these offices, which may take on new names such as “Office of Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Life,” should prioritize administrative oversight of and advocacy for all RSSIs as vital priorities for their staff. In changing these names, the offices may present a more inclusive tone as well as demonstrate explicitly the broad services they offer.

On the public university and RSSI offices

Public institutions of higher education have rarely created offices which provide RSSI oversight and support services. This has led to a generative effect in which these identities do not have status within DEI strategic plans or within institutional campus climate analyses. With a greater understanding that the separation of Church and State and secularism narratives are positioned within white Christian privilege, public institutions should establish offices, staffing, and resources which are modeled after the above-mentioned RSS offices. Their roles, as outlined above, should largely be constituted with oversight and advocacy of RSSIs, including evaluating and recommending policy and practice shifts within the institution.

On placement within the institutional structure

RSS offices should be considered a part of the larger efforts on institutional climate. These offices and their staff should be placed within the organizational structure at the location that works for both students and the policies of the institution. Careful considerations should be made for these staff to be a part of larger DEI conversations, especially those involving institutional anti-racism and decolonization efforts. Finally, these offices should be permitted adequate organizational resources to provide opportunities to holistically enhance the institutional climate, including training and resourcing for staff, administrators, and faculty regarding RSSIs.

The creation of presence of these offices and their re-designations both in name and in staff configurations can foster a broader recognition of the values of the institution of a holistically inclusive campus climate for RSSIs.

References

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