



On the Use of Survey Tools in Demographic Data for RSSIs

Throughout higher education, data is a driving factor in decision-making at macro and micro levels of institutions. Numbers and data drive decisions which commit financial resources, influence strategic plans, and involve every aspect of higher education from admissions to advancement. In recent years, some institutions of higher education have stopped collecting data pertaining to religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs) on campus, effectively losing track of this demographic data. This lack of data potentially threatens the support of marginalized individuals who have struggled to access resources and needs related to their RSSIs.

Using survey tools for religious, secular, and spiritual identities

The collection of RSSI data is important in understanding the changing demographics of countries and societies. American culture is currently experiencing a dramatic shift in its religious, secular, and spiritual climate (Pew Research Center, 2014), and likely no more dramatic than on campus. The following concerns should be examined by institutions of higher education when collecting RSSI data:

1. Include the option for individuals to self-identify within any collecting of any pertinent demographic data;
2. Reevaluate survey tools as a method of providing relevant categories in alignment with changing religious, secular, and spiritual demographics; and
3. Critically examine the use of “other” and “none” as categories, attempting to remove their potentially tokenizing and marginalized effects.

On the option for individuals to self-identify

Institutions of higher education which collect demographic data from college students should consider the methods and opportunities for students to self-identify with any form of RSSI they wish to choose. This should include allowing students to make multiple selections on any survey tool which has a selection of RSSIs. In addition, survey instruments should inquire about the traditions in which students were raised, in order to understand students' cultural viewpoints and inherent biases:

For instance, if respondents who were reared Christian but labeled themselves as atheist (which is not uncommon for traditionally aged college students) are considered religious minorities during analysis, researchers may be overlooking the way that they, through their socialized behaviors, are actually contributing to the culture of hegemonic Christianity on campus. Furthermore, if respondents from religious minority families, for similar reasons, label themselves as atheist, researchers may fail to see the full extent of religious diversity present in the data. (Edwards, 2018, p. 211)



All data should be analyzed and made available for use by administrators, who then can make effective decisions on policy and practice which support the campus community.

On reevaluating survey tools

Survey tools to collect data related to RSSIs often are inappropriately skewed toward Protestant Christian traditions. For instance, the category “Jewish” does not offer the same diversity of choices for a Jewish student as Protestant individuals often have with their choices parceled out into denominations such as “United Methodist,” “Presbyterian,” “Lutheran,” and more. Additionally, making survey tools inclusive requires categories for traditions such as Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Confucian, Daoist, and Native American spirituality, among others. When developing inclusive categories of identification on survey instruments, efforts should be made to seek insights from religious communities.

On the use of “other” and “none” as a self-identifier

The use of “other” is a potential stumbling block for higher education demographic studies. In best case scenarios, “other” can present an individual with the opportunity to express a complex set of multiple RSSIs which are otherwise difficult to express on surveys. Yet, the use of “other” can also be used as a tool of marginalization if it replaces comprehensive categories. Institutions should use the term “other” while still including a robust selection of categories for identification. This will allow for individuals to select multiple identities and also to offer any necessary explanation or elaboration.

Similar to the use of “other,” the use of “none” in demographic studies can be problematic. Traditionally, “none” has been equated to “nothing in particular.” Yet, “other” has as well been associated with “atheist,” which may skew demographic data and overly estimate the size of the atheist population. As mentioned above, the “none” label can also disguise the true population of students who were raised in a Christian cultural worldview.

As institutions use data to evaluate programs, resourcing, and dedicated support for individuals, administrators should take responsibility for finding effective methods to evaluate their campuses’ religious, secular, and spiritual demographics. Furthermore, they should respond with effective policies and practices which seek to foster a sense of belonging for those individuals currently attending the institution, as well as for future generations.

References

- Edwards, S. (2018). Distinguishing between belief and culture: A critical perspective on religious identity. *Journal of College and Character*, 19(3), 201-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2018.1481097>
- Pew Research Center. (2014). *Religious landscape study*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>