



On religion and culture

Over the past 15-20 years, higher education scholars have taken a new interest in understanding college students' religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs). Research on this topic has grown substantially, mainly focusing on students' beliefs, practices, associated worldviews (such as political ideologies), and intergroup relationships. This research, while long overdue and quite important, for the most part has ignored those components of RSSIs that are not self-chosen by individuals, but instead are cultural elements bestowed by virtue of heritage and upbringing.

Broadening understandings within the field of higher education

Higher education scholars and practitioners need to broaden their understandings of RSSIs to include such cultural elements as family heritage and observances, and country of origin (of self and of family). All of these elements influence the ways students experience their identities. The following concepts should be applied when considering the relationship between religion and culture:

1. Beliefs and self-chosen labels are only partial components of RSSIs; therefore, studying them in conjunction with cultural background will yield more complete knowledge;
2. Cultural influence means that individuals who identify using the same label may observe their RSSIs in different manners; and
3. The use of the term "multicultural" on campuses should be inclusive of RSSIs.

On including cultural background for a more complete knowledge of RSSIs

Higher education research on student RSSIs has become focused on the labels students self-apply as the means for sample categorization. It is assumed that these labels are either unchanging, or if they do change, that the student has moved to an entirely different set of beliefs and values. However, "whereas individuals' religious/spiritual beliefs can, and do, frequently change ..., religious culture is more engrained and can shape persons' worldviews even if they no longer hold the beliefs associated with that religion" (Edwards, 2018, p. 202). This phenomenon applies to students who self-label as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, or "none," as they have likely been heavily influenced by the beliefs and values of their family and cultural heritage. In other words, when researchers and administrators count student populations on campus or in a study, understanding the Christian heritage of the majority of non-religious students will yield a more accurate estimation of the influence of Christianity upon the sample. This estimation will in turn reduce the normalization of Christianity as the default identity in the United States, even by those who no longer practice it or even believe in its ideologies.



On the impact of cultural influence on RSSI observances

One should not assume that all Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus observe their religious practices in the same way, much in the way that a member of a traditionally Black church would observe Christianity in a different manner from a white, mainline Protestant. Country of origin, family practices, racial and ethnic identities, and more, all shape RSSIs. Scholars studying RSSIs should be mindful of potential cultural differences, considering data collection methods and analyses that are able to mine for these nuances. In addition, campus practitioners should help student religious organizations interrogate their group practices to ensure they are not marginalizing of students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds or racial identities (Stewart & Lozano, 2009).

On a multiculturalism that is inclusive of RSSIs

Finally, Convergence advocates for an expansion of common understandings of the terms “multicultural” and “multiculturalism.” Including the diversity of RSSIs when addressing such cultural influences as race, ethnicity, and national origin will yield a more complete understanding of culture. Then, addressing a multiplicity of cultures and the relationships between and among them will result in a compounding of that more complete understanding.

It is time for higher education researchers and practitioners to expand their knowledge of religious, secular, and spiritual identities beyond students’ self-chosen labels to include cultural heritage. This expansion will yield a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the students on our campuses, and therefore, the best ways to work with and support them.

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>
- Stewart, D. L., & Lozano, A. (2009). Difficult dialogues at the intersections of race, culture, and religion. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2009(125), 23-31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.304>