On the role of staff and administrators in supporting RSSIs

Despite significant student-focused movements on college and university campuses around college student religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs), there exists significant gaps within institutional policies and practices. For instance, a campus may have a well-established interfaith group, but have yet to implement important practical offerings such as kosher and halal food options or prayer, meditation, and reflection spaces that are suitable for a variety of identities. In essence, the creation of student movements has not translated into a transformation of higher education institutions themselves. The recommended solution to this problem is to expand the efforts to focus on professionals.

Utilizing professionals as catalysts for change on campuses

In order to improve campuses toward full equity and inclusion for people of diverse RSSIs, higher education should focus on administrators and practitioners as the most impactful catalysts for long-term environmental changes. When developing the infrastructure for such improvements, the following concepts should be applied:

1. Focus on staff and administrators as the catalysts for on-campus change;
    2. Enhance professionals' effectiveness through equipping them with resources, skills, and new support networks; and
3. Utilize the four pillars of policy and practice approach as a guiding philosophy.

On focusing on staff and administrators

By definition, policies and practices that are aimed at student populations have a finite impact. This is due to the ever-rotating population of students on campus, as they matriculate, progress through, graduate, and/or transfer. Each year, new students arrive, needing to learn new skills, and some students leave, taking their hard-earned knowledge and leadership with them. Interventions focused on improving students' interfaith capacities therefore must be repeated year after year. Staff and administrators, however, may stay employed at their institutions for a much longer period of time. When these individuals develop their skills and capacities, they can use them in a cumulative manner, bringing about long-term changes in their environments. These changed environments then benefit all students, not solely those who opt in to RSSI communities. Therefore, while not ceasing to work with interested students, efforts should be made at a much broader campus level.

On equipping professionals

Staff and administrators must be provided with the necessary resources, skills, and support networks, in order for them to be effective in improving their campuses' environments. For some professionals, supporting RSSIs is new and perhaps daunting. No one should be expected to do this work without first having training and education around RSSI topics and practices. Campus administrators and others with budget oversight should account for the time, money, and other resources (i.e. allowances of professional development days) that are required for practitioners to build their knowledge bases and professional skills.

On utilizing the four pillars of policy and practice

The Four Pillars for Supporting Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Student Identities (Nielsen & Small, 2019) are a comprehensive strategy for making college and university campuses equitable and inclusive for all RSSIs. The four pillars are: I. Relationships and Oversight, II. Advocacy and Accommodation, III. Infrastructure, and IV. Programming and Training.

Overall, the adoption of the Four Pillars of Policy and Practice may be the solution to long-standing stagnation regarding campus climate around religious, secular, and spiritual identities. While significant work remains to be completed in order to support the lives of millions of college students in the United States and Canada, engaged professionals who utilize this framework and address the concerns under each pillar should find improvements in the morale of their community. In addition, utilizing this strategy to make structural changes at the institutional level will free administrators from having to recreate the work each year as a new batch of students enters the institution and another graduates. Finally, campus policies and practices developed under the Four Pillar approach will offer models of success for other institutions to emulate, enabling a spreading of these successful changes throughout the higher education system. (pp. 185-186)

Reference

Nielsen, J. C., & Small, J. L. (2019). Four pillars for supporting religious, secular, and spiritual student identities. *Journal of College and Character, 20*(2), 180-186. https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2019.1591285