



On the relationship between external religious communities and institutions

Since the founding of Harvard College in 1636, higher education has been deeply connected with the religious communities present across North America. These communities were once mostly connected to campuses through university chaplains, but now are overwhelmingly represented by externally-based organizations. These organizations vary in their structures. Some, like Hillel International, the Wesley Foundations (United Methodist Church), Newman Centers (Roman Catholic), United Sikh Movement, the Secular Student Alliance, and others, have national organizations with which some local chapters are affiliated. Some of these organizations, like Hindu Student Associations and Muslim Student Associations, have a less formal national structure, but are loosely connected.

Considering religious organizations and professionals outside of the institution

In order to foster a campus community which is inclusive of all RSSIs, higher education administrators and institutions should provide ample processes through which to build trust, buy-in, as well as oversight of these individuals and organizations (Small & Nielsen, 2019). When considering the relationship between these communities, institutions should address the following:

1. Institutional connections to these outside organizations;
2. Religious leaders' institutional affiliations;
3. Religious, secular, and spiritual organizations and their affiliations; and
4. Professional training requirements of religious personnel

On the institutional connections to these outside organizations

Peter Magolda (2010) suggests that higher education has missed opportunities to collaborate with external religious communities as a part of co-curricular education. Stating that higher education had taken a "strict and sometimes literal interpretation of the separation of church and state doctrine" (p. 4), his ethnographic study revealed the opportunities gained when both religious and higher education professionals reach out in cooperation. Magolda highlights how religious entities can serve the greater institution's goals and aims if given opportunity.

Higher education should consider its relationship with religious, secular, and spiritual organizations as an opportunity for effective collaboration. It is likely that many religious communities, especially those which have professional staff, can offer specific wisdom on the student experience that few other professionals may have on campus. As well, if given guidance, oversight, and professional training, these externally-based religious leaders can serve the institution in important and meaningful ways at a minimum cost to the institution. Higher education should consider these opportunities and thus dismantle any walls of separation that exist.

On religious leaders' institutional affiliations

Outside religious communities may employ professionals to serve their various communities as a part of their roles on campus. Institutions should formalize a role for these professionals and afford them various responsibilities. Many campuses provide a variety of benefits to these professionals, including



ID cards, parking passes, and email addresses from the university's servers. Though prevalent in some regions of the North America, a movement in recent years away from this appears to be slowly sweeping across institutions of higher education. The movement away from these benefits isolates religious communities and prevents institutions from having a role in overseeing these various professionals and their practices with students, something which has been highlighted to be important in manifesting an inclusive and equitable campus climate (Nielsen & Small, 2019).

As with Greek life professionals and chapters, higher education has an opportunity to provide a level of oversight for some of the more prominent communities with which students affiliate. Providing a more formalized relationship is beneficial in reducing stigmas, enhancing religious equity and protections on campus, as well as reducing a variety of activities which may be divisive and problematic to the campus culture.

On religious, secular, and spiritual organizations and their affiliations

Many religious communities gather together in the form of affiliate associations of organizations outside of university structures as a way to collaborate, agree upon certain values, and create shared resources. Sometimes, these groups are officially affiliated with the university, which may include having an administrator to which the group occasionally reports. These associations can be effective in providing the university relationships; in turn, institutions can provide a level of oversight with these various groups. This offers the opportunity for structures of accountability to be put in place related to religious activities and concerns around any violations of religious rights on campus. Universities should consider these groups as an opportunity to build trust and should support their creation and sustained presence as a part of overall support for religious, secular, and spiritual identities on campus.

On professional training of outside religious professionals

Institutions of higher education may be hesitant to provide a formal status for outside religious professionals, especially due to concerns around intentions of religious leaders to coerce, convict, or convince students of "right" religion identity. However, formal training of the professionals, similar to an on-boarding for staff, can provide a formal structure which helps to build trust and collaboration between outside religious leaders and institutions. Colleges and universities can consider a variety of methods to approach this relationship, but they may do well to consider how the creation of non-paid staff who are trained similarly to official employees of the institution may be beneficial.

Outside religious communities have a complicated history with higher education. In the current environments on campus, it may benefit institutions to foster more receptive relationship tactics, demonstrating a greater understanding that religious, secular, and spiritual needs are core to the university's efforts at diversity, equity, and inclusion. While at times complicated and requiring dedicated and sustained efforts by staff and administrators, these relationships can build important opportunities for engagement and dialogue across campus.

References

- Magolda, P. M. (2010). An unholy alliance: Rethinking collaboration involving student affairs and faith-based student organizations. *Journal of College and Character*, 11(4), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1734>
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