

Setting Down the 10-Foot Pole: A Review of *Educating on Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement*

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Published by: Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2019, 324 pages

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Religion, sex, politics, and money. We have been told to avoid these high-profile topics because they lead to disagreement and arguing. And many of us wouldn't approach those topics with a 10-foot pole. Yet, student affairs as a profession does not shy away from difficult conversations, hosting programs, workshops, and retreats on challenging topics, such as oppression, privilege, safer sex practices, civic engagement, and fiscal management. Master's programs around the country also teach developmental theories focused on identity, epistemology, and moral reasoning and ways to support students' growth in these areas. However, when it comes to religion and spirituality, many people put distance between themselves and any conversation about these topics, whether intentionally or not. As student affairs professionals, we may not feel educated or prepared enough to engage in those conversations, so we divert our focus elsewhere and never develop the competence and skill to do so. Thus, we maintain that 10-foot distance between our professional practice and our students' spiritual lives.

In *Educating About Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook for Student Affairs*, Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess, and Eboo Patel seek to engage higher education professionals in the necessary process of setting down the 10-foot pole. As a resource, this book provides helpful and practical tools for professionals looking to move in close to a topic that would otherwise go unaddressed. An excellent read for any level professional, it is filled with resources on different worldviews, strategies for engaging religious diversity on

campus, and ideas for promoting this work in our own contexts.

The Taboo Identity: Worldview Diversity and Student Affairs

While engaging in topics on religion and spirituality may be taboo, worldview diversity work is an essential next step in student affairs. *Educating on Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement* reaches out to student affairs professionals, using familiar language and environments, to prepare practitioners and educators for this work. The sections below will provide an overview of the book, highlighting the significance to the broader field of student affairs and to orientation, transition, and retention, specifically.

Discomfort Can Be Developmental

The first part of this book seeks to orient the reader to worldview identity. Chapter 1, “Preparing for Interfaith Engagement,” situates the reader by using language made familiar in the ACPA-NASPA (2015) competencies, including personal and ethical foundations, law, policy, and governance, student learning and development, and social justice and inclusion. One topic that spans all these competencies but rarely gets mentioned in professional preparation programs is religion. Here, the contributors connect issues of religious, spiritual, and secular identities to these competencies.

Understanding that student affairs professionals, especially those working in public institutions, would likely be uncomfortable engaging with religious identities in their work, the editors make the case in the opening section that interfaith work is the responsibility of everyone working in higher education. In Chapter 1, Christy Moran Craft and Kathleen M. Gooden dispel the myth that those who work at public institutions cannot support worldview diversity on campus. Chapter 2 describes data from two national longitudinal studies on student religious and worldview identity, highlighting the connections between student outcomes and interfaith engagement.

One area of discomfort might be resolving tensions between social justice orientations and engagement with religious ideologies that have been the root cause of oppression for many. As a professional who works to promote justice by addressing power, privilege, and oppression and as a student in a social justice-oriented master’s program, I found the final chapter in this section especially challenging. The authors, Eboo Patel

and Cassie Meyer, come from outside student affairs and bring a valuable lens for understanding how to approach religious identity within the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. For example, they suggest that an interfaith cooperation approach would be better suited than a social justice approach when incorporating religious diversity into existing DEI frameworks. I found myself lingering on this chapter longer than others as I stopped to process my feelings about what I read. However, approaching the challenging topics of this chapter with an open mind allowed me to enter a conversation with the authors and emerge with new perspectives to take into my work. I would suggest this chapter as a starting point for anyone who feels they would struggle with interfaith engagement due to a strong social justice ethic.

Minding the Gap

For most of us in student affairs, there is a significant knowledge and skills gap around promoting interfaith engagement on campus. The second part of the book addresses knowledge gaps in the classroom and how readers can work with their academic partners to reduce them. For those who oversee student success courses (i.e., UNIV 101) or partner with academic affairs in any way, these chapters offer strategies for incorporating interfaith engagement into the classroom. More importantly, this section provides insight into closing the knowledge and skills gap through student affairs preparation programs. For higher education faculty, those who aspire to teach in preparation programs, or those supervising student affairs graduate assistants, the chapters in Part 2 offer great insight. Chapter 4 (Kathleen M. Goodman, Sherry K. Watt, and Tricia A. Seifert) highlights courses in three different student affairs graduate programs that prepare practitioners to engage spirituality, religion, and secularity on campus. In Chapter 5, Jenny L. Small and James P. Barber discuss embedding interfaith engagement in existing master's coursework. While these discussions may have less applicability for front-line student affairs practitioners, they highlight areas of personal development and offer strategies for facilitating the development of graduate student staff.

Part 3 continues the discussion on narrowing the knowledge and skills gap by focusing on professional development strategies and activities. In Chapter 7, Ariel Ennis and Tarah Trueblood highlight two programs created to train student affairs practitioners on supporting the worldview identity development of students. As someone always looking for professional development opportunities, this chapter offered

new ideas on how to increase my cultural competencies concerning worldview orientation. Chapter 8 by Kathleen M. Goodman includes helpful resources and activities to promote interfaith engagement among student and professional staff. The final chapter in this section contains 19 educational activities from various institution types, which offers readers many ideas for things to try or adapt for their own campus contexts. For example, Earlham College (Richmond, Indiana) uses scenario discussions to train their resident assistants on situations involving worldview orientation. A similar approach could be taken with training with orientation leaders. Both InterFaith Youth Corps (InterFaith Youth Corps) and NASPA (Singer, 2017) offer case studies helpful in incorporating discussions of worldview and interfaith engagement into orientation training programs.

In Part 4, readers will find case studies designed for use with students, practitioners, and faculty. Professionals working in orientation, transition, and retention (OTR) programs may find chapters 10 and 14 helpful. For example, the case in chapter 10 discusses the legal battle over a summer reading selection focused on Islam following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the role of summer orientation staff in addressing concerns from students, family, and the larger community. Chapter 14 includes several short scenarios orientation leaders and professional staff are likely to encounter. The most relevant include negotiating roommate issues, addressing concerns raised by community members, missing classes for religious observance, and planning for special dietary needs for campus events.

Knowing Your Students

To provide high-quality support to students, we must understand their needs. Being familiar with the worldview identities represented on our campuses (if the institution collects this information) is a great place to start. Learning more about the worldviews of the students with whom we work most closely is also important. Part 5 provides insight into the worldview orientations we will likely encounter on campus, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, secularism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism. Each chapter includes a basic overview of the beliefs, traditions, and holidays or observances associated with the worldview and describes experiences students holding these worldviews may have on campuses. While not an in-depth exploration, each chapter provides student affairs practitioners with a strong foundation for understanding and supporting students with diverse worldviews.

When Interfaith Engagement Meets Orientation, Transition, and Retention

As most students first exposure to college, orientation is an ideal environment to set the tone for the types of conversations students can expect to have about worldview identity. In addition, encouraging interfaith engagement from the start allows continued growth to take place throughout the college experience. The sections below will highlight OTR staff members' role in interfaith engagement and religious diversity work.

So, What Does This Have to Do With Me?

Breaking down power and privilege to have meaningful engagement across differences does not happen overnight, and the seeds to start interfaith engagement on campus should be planted at orientation. By incorporating worldview into orientation programs, student affairs practitioners and educators can create a space on campus that is open to dialogue and discovery. For example, discussing race or sexual orientation was once taboo, and now we host LGBT* socials and promote various cultural student organizations during orientation. Similarly, by including interfaith engagement in low-risk ways during orientation (e.g., listing halal and kosher food options in the dining hall), we can create a welcoming campus climate for all incoming students and promote an environment for interfaith engagement.

Doing the Work...and the Resources to Help

Becoming educated on religious diversity and interfaith engagement is just the first step in supporting the worldview development of college students. Student affairs educators need to initiate interfaith engagement work on our campuses. As mentioned before, this book is full of helpful ideas, resources, and examples for ways to begin. My suggestion would be to start small by adapting existing programs and services to include worldview examples and be more inclusive of non-Christian worldviews. Acknowledging which orientation sessions conflict with religious holidays, providing inclusive dining options, and allowing for daily prayer/meditation/reflection times that do not conflict with other events are all great starting points.

I appreciated the book's emphasis on educating ourselves about worldview identities without relying on students to do this work for us.

Colleagues on campus can be great resources for additional information. When in doubt about a particular group or identity, reach out to a campus chaplain or the advisor to the student organization associated with that worldview. These individuals can describe what they hear from students and are often happy to offer advice or resources. If the campus does not have a connection to a particular worldview group, there is likely a resource in the community where we can learn more or guide students for support.

Student affairs practitioners are rarely pushed to explore worldview diversity. By offering real-life examples and valuable resources, *Educating on Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement* is a good starting point.

References

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