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Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence in Higher Education

The RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS of higher education are changing rapidly. College campuses have become prime sites for conflicts involving religious identity. Many such stories have made national news—polarizing debates about Israel/Palestine, frustration by campus religious groups regarding “all comers” policies, the emergence

and Los Angeles. The student body includes members of the local Somali Muslim, Hmong, and Native American communities; students of color constitute 30 percent of the student body, and Lutherans only 20 percent.

Such dynamics are only one dimension of what Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen call “pluriform religion” in their recent book, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*. They claim that the era in which religion was privatized

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Higher education is well equipped to take on this charge. America's college campuses have long set the educational and civic agenda for the nation on issues such as multiculturalism, volunteerism, and environmentalism. College campuses are social laboratories where a range of interfaith strategies can be tested; faculty can help create the necessary knowledge base to support and guide interfaith engagement, and higher education can make it a priority to nurture interfaith leaders, much as it has done with multicultural leaders. Of course, many college campuses have been doing some version of this on an ad hoc basis for many years. Chaplains and deans of religious life have worked to accommodate the spiritual needs of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, humanist, and other minority traditions. Students have launched interfaith clubs and councils. Courses focusing

Eboo Patel,
AAC&U Annual Meeting

have had experience with interfaith cooperation

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public space was necessary if they were to be honest about meeting the needs of their student body. Therefore, Utah Valley's president, himself a member of the LDS church, approved a new wellness building on the condition that it include a space that would be open to students of all faith traditions. This interfaith reflection center demonstrates the university's commitment to respecting and accommodating the full array of students' religious identities.

5. Making interfaith cooperation an academic priority.

**Higher education movements
lack "legs" if students are
not committed or invested**

visits to sacred spaces and faith-based spring break service trips, and provide guidance and advising to Elizabethtown's service-focused "Better Together" interfaith student group. In addition, Elizabethtown students may be selected as undergraduate fellows in ethical leadership, a program that emphasizes interfaith leadership. The fellows focus on networking, integrating life and work, and reflecting on experiences such as internships and volunteer service. Through these efforts, Elizabethtown is leveraging community relationships in order to help students take their interfaith leadership into "real life."

9. *Assessing campus climates and interfaith initiatives.* Interfaith cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon and, accordingly, intentional

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