

CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF RELIGION IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Culture Connection

The University Campus, and its educational culture, is in a protracted period of experiencing a rapidly changing landscape. This includes undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and administration. These processes are both disruptive, requiring frequent recalibrations, and exhilarating, generating new possibilities. There are several trigger mechanisms for this dynamic time of transition including the resurgence of religion in classrooms, residential life, volunteerism, student organizations, faculty research, governance challenges, and campus public squares. For much of the 20th century, religion retreated to the margins of campus life in most universities and to private and parochial expressions. The last couple of decades have witnessed religion demanding a more public profile, sharing with several other major influencers a critical role in how higher education evolves in the near term and far horizon. The implications of these changes in the campus landscape are just now coming into view. Among the many that could be itemized, let me suggest three that, in my opinion, directly address the future of religious expression in the university.

1. Recent studies have documented that faculty are robustly religious and spiritual.

Faculty are an indispensable resource for the Multi-Faith/Interreligious mission on college campuses. Faculty participation is a requirement for a vital future of religious experience in campus life.

2. The entrenched secularism, that has ruled most of the public research universities, is no longer a monopoly. It is not the case that secularity is in retrenchment or disappearing – it is now learning to be more hospitable to and share power with its neighbor, religion. The common understanding has not yet caught up to the new reality.
3. The so-called Millennials, who make up most of the current undergraduates, graduate students, and younger faculty, are radically different from previous generations. Their religious perspectives and practices are frequently not connected institutionally and are far less provincial in their attitudes about doctrine and ethics. Interreligious dialogue will need to make considerable adjustments to the new class of discussants. A whole new and expanded invitation list is required for the next iteration of Interfaith expressions and projects.

There is a vast vault of literature documenting these volatile conditions: additionally, an ever greater stockpile of anecdotal evidence exists. Two very recent books on this subject are worthy of mention. The first is *The Quest for Meaning and Wholeness: Spiritual and Religious Connections in the Lives of College Faculty* by Jennifer A. Lindholm. The second: *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, by Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen.

**Dealing with Religion in a Time of Transition*

[Excerpts from No Longer Invisible]

Given the pluriformity of religion today, it is no wonder that colleges and university are uncertain about how to talk about it and respond to it. We are living in a time of transition. The old rhetoric of religious privatization no longer works, but new and better ways of addressing religious concerns and questions have not yet been clearly formulated. The challenges are immense. The range of religious views in the contemporary college and university world is simply stunning. Most large campuses have student populations that include conservative Protestant creationists and earth-worshipping Wiccans, spiritually inspired vegans and hijab-wearing Muslims, social-justice religious activists and right-wing religious ideologues, spiritual atheists and “believers” who are longer sure they believe in God, new converts who want to share their faith with everyone, and students who have grown up religious but know practically nothing about their own faiths. What limits should be put on discussions to keep them from getting out of control? What rules should guide student interactions? How should faculty respond to religious comments by students? Should faculty themselves ever reveal their religious or spiritual convictions?

College and university learning should be useful, but it has always sought to be more than merely pragmatic or economically self-advancing. Our hope is that big questions of meaning and purpose, important questions of social norms and values, factual questions about science and society, and existential questions about how people with different ideas, ideals, and life goals can live and work together for the benefit of everyone will be part of every undergraduate experience.