

GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING AN INTERFAITH STUDIES PROGRAM ON A UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE CAMPUS

In this document, American religious scholar, Dr. Nathan Kollar, outlines the issues involved in establishing an Interfaith Studies Program on a college or university campus. Dr. Kollar proposes a mission statement and explores numerous issues including diversity of views, resources, challenges, risks, support for marginal voices and the encouragement of dialogue rather than diatribe.

A mission statement for Interfaith Studies should always include the following points:

1. Interfaith dialogue deals with religions individually and comparatively from the perspective of diverse fields of study such as sociology, political science, literature, theology, and religious studies. It is interdisciplinary.
2. Its purpose is to bring individuals and institutions together in conversation for mutual understanding and action to benefit the common good of which knowledge, peace, and empathy for each other are of primary importance.
3. At a minimum, it studies and seeks to understand this purpose through all the disciplines that now study religion and religions, while hoping to develop new methods of research and bodies of knowledge unique to interfaith to implement this seeking.
4. In such study the acquisition of factual knowledge of religions includes the admission of mystery and paradox as inherent to our understanding of religions in general and each religion in particular.
5. It accepts change as inherent in all religious manifestations and seeks to identify religious change as it occurs within individuals and religious communities.
6. The recognition of equality among all and empathy for all are both necessary and advocated in all religious encounters titled interfaith. This is not an advocacy of easy relativism, for it recognizes, as David Tracy has said: "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it." (Quoted from *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, by David Tracy, [Chicago: University of Chicago; San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987], p. 19.)
7. It recognizes and accepts the need for accountability in the manner in which it describes the various religions as well as the content of each description.
8. It is distinguished from other disciplines by its necessary inclusion of the primacy of mystery, paradox, and empathy in its selection, dissemination, and interchanges of information and by methodologies particular to its field of study.

Institutionalization in Practice: What Do We Do?

Bringing interfaith on campus challenges the campus itself to acknowledge religious diversity as a necessary part of the institution. Space limitations prevent me from providing a detailed discussion of how an institution goes about establishing an interfaith program or department and

encouraging others within the institution to abide by the necessary valuing of religious diversity. Instead, I will list below six foundational questions that must be asked and provide some answers to these questions.

1. *How should we treat the differing views in our institutions and classrooms, and what should we do to ensure that we encourage dialogue rather than diatribe in the class?*

We should take into account:

- (a) The various types of students in our classrooms: those who are secure and at ease with the language and presuppositions of our classes, and those without formal religious experience or training, who are insecure and uncertain about the language and presuppositions present in our classrooms. Subset within each of the above are: the very certain students, the everything-is-relative students, the seekers, the students from mixed religious backgrounds.
- (b) The purpose and mission of the institution.
- (c) The difference between a graduate and undergraduate institution. Graduate schools of theology and ministry have an obligation to form students in the tradition that they represent, while treating all equally, with respect, with honor, and without bias. Undergraduate institutions have an obligation to provide more of an “objective” presentation of views.
- (d) The developmental nature of student learning as well as the life-experiences of those involved in the classroom encounters.
- (e) We should treat each religious view/voice appropriately:
 - a. By acknowledging the view (religion) as the speaker intends.
 - b. By providing a space and time for interaction between those who hold these views/lead these ways of life.
 - c. By establishing an atmosphere of respectful dialogue – for example, by beginning with “In my opinion ...” or “Today, I think ...”
 - d. By recognizing voices representative of current or past religious views or ways of life as truly authoritative because of those they represent. For example, “This view is Lutheran/Muslim. Here is where you can find out more about it.” Support them as legitimate positions that people of good heart and mind could hold, with a substantial following despite their minority status in this class, institution, or culture.
 - e. By not pandering or speaking in a condescending manner but by providing respect, shown through critical questioning.\
 - f. By allowing diversity to emerge.
 - g. By establishing a process with the students, within the classroom, for what to do, what to do when everything is okay, what to do when it is not okay. This is in response to strong disagreement about a religious issue.\
 - h. By providing the necessary temporal or physical space to respond, for example, by saying, “We’ll deal with this next class/week. Till then think about the best way of dealing with this way of seeing things.” Many teachers want to “fix things” immediately, when many things in life take time.

- (f) Not tolerance but empathy should be the rule. Tolerance says, “We’ll accept you, but we’re better.” Empathy shows appreciation, seeks common ground with the other(s), and imaginatively enters into the “world” of the other.

2. *What are the necessary materials, pedagogies, and social interactions we should encourage in our schools in order to provide students with a broad view of what is happening in our surrounding religious world that forms the foundation for dialogue?*

- (a) We should bring representatives of other religious ways of life into the classroom in person or through means of various media.
- (b) We should encourage student use of the Internet in order for them to come into contact with and/or deepen their knowledge and awareness of religious others.
- (c) We should facilitate student visits to religious places of worship, activities, and places of learning and work.
- (d) We should provide panels available to the public with a variety of religious experts and representatives of various religious ways of life, so that both students and the interested public may encounter each other.
- (e) We should make available all-school worship and/or gatherings for worship by each religious group in the institution, including, for example, the prayer/*salat* of Muslims five times a day, or some Christians praying the Angelus.
- (f) We should support study abroad for long or short periods of time. These periods of study should include, as part of the program, reflection on the religious dimension of the cultures with which they are engaged.
- (g) We should provide financial assistance for gatherings of autobiographical materials representative of a variety of religious ways of life.
- (h) We should both recognize and encourage student reflection on what they have encountered.
- (i) We should be vocal supporters of library budgets that provide various points of view.
- (j) We should provide examples of the power and functional success of the “other” point of view in people’s lives.
- (k) We should do the same for those from the more “familiar” traditions; the “familiar” religious tradition in one school is not necessarily the familiar tradition in the other schools.
- (l) Pedagogies should be interactive and varied and should encourage intellectual experimentation and dissent, take imaginative leaps into other perspectives, and set perspectives within sociohistorical contexts.

3. *When we allow different voices into our institutions and classrooms, or encourage our students to visit those who are different from themselves, what should be done about the possible dangers and limits to this exposure?*

- (a) Possible dangers: Most of the time there are no imminent threats to students’ physical, psychological, social, and spiritual welfare. However, education itself may be dangerous to some, anxiety-filled for many, and an energizing, freeing leap to new life for some.
If one is engaged in education – especially a liberal-arts education that includes theology/religious studies – one enters into a time and place of liminality (Victor Turner). Liminality is inherently dangerous as one traverses from one or several points of view to others. Some movement from one to another may involve a

movement from one horizon to another – that is, a conversion experience (Bernard Lonergan). Physical, social, mental, and spiritual dangers surround those in a state of liminality. The question is not one of avoidance of dangers but of how to cope with them.

All the ordinary means of dealing with such dangers in life should be used here. The typical responses to danger such as fight, flight, adaptation, and boredom should be discussed if necessary. Unless one becomes involved with religions that are anti-social and/or criminal in behavior, the most obvious response is curiosity, which is also a healthy emotion to cultivate and reflect upon.

- (b) The limits: Opinionated words and actions are limited by the demands of evidence and proof by the academic community, among which is critical reasoning; the necessity of hospitality and manners toward all; the requirements of dialogue; the importance of honoring the person while disagreeing with her or his claim; the importance of being open to all views presented without turning the principle of openness into an absolute, demanding anarchy; and individual conscience. The human limitation is that one can only do so much, believe so much, know so much. Humans are limited creatures.

4. What are the necessary materials that the teacher should share with the students before they experience those who are marginal to the majority by means of either a visit to their place of worship or service to those in need?

- (a) The preparation and sharing in order to encounter the other is similar to the teacher's preparation for encountering any new source of information and experience. These may be any or a combination of what is itemized here:
 - a. Provide nothing – allow the encounter to take place without any “bias” provided by the teacher.
 - b. Provide some written or media source to be read, listened to, and/or seen that reviews what the students will encounter before going to experience the religious other.
 - c. Orally provide the categories for interpretation and examples.
 - d. Provide a checklist in writing to be used in providing a response to the encounter.
 - e. Provide nothing, but require a journal entry or some other means of free writing to reflect and express the results of the encounter.
- (b) Require a group discussion about the encounter. Require a written, oral, individual, and/or group in-class feedback. This may also be done by means of other electronic media.

5. What is the minimum number of interreligious voices and intrareligious voices that are necessary in every curriculum in our respective institutions and in theology and religious studies in general?

This is not so much the quantity but the quality of engagement with the other. In order for learning to take place, the following must be taken into consideration: an ability to demonstrate an understanding of the other's words and actions; a sense of empathy with the other; an ability to compare and contrast one's way of life with the other's way of life; an ability to read their writings, to share their worship imaginatively, to engage in their polity, and to accept their moral perspectives as one's

own; to recognize oneself as an “other”; an ability to listen and to question and to deal with contemporary religious pluralism.

6. *What are some pedagogical affirmations that are supportive of marginal voices in the theology/religious studies/religion/philosophy/interfaith curriculum?*

- (a) A sense of hospitality, civility, and respect should pervade our institutional culture.
- (b) The presence of marginal voices in the curriculum enhances an understanding of one’s faith life.
- (c) The curriculum should foster an understanding of diverse ideas, beliefs, and practices.
- (d) While acknowledging, respecting, and providing support for each voice, we should also acknowledge, respect, and provide support for the ties that bind us together as both an academic and a human community.
- (e) While acknowledging that we should focus on the communal traditions that characterize our academic institution, we also acknowledge that these same traditions are marginal voices in other contexts.
- (f) The discussion and analysis of these voices should use the methods and language of the academy in general and the method and language of the proper academic discipline in particular.
- (g) Time for reflection, discussion, and analysis should be allowed for each voice – minimally, time for directed reflection must be encouraged for each voice that speaks.
- (h) Part of the process of listening to, reflection upon, and analysis of marginal voices should also include what is common to all voices.
- (i) Faculty and staff should model constructive ways of engaging other voices.
- (j) The curriculum should include learning objectives that challenge the institution to put these pedagogical affirmations into practice.
- (k) Appropriate assessment procedures should be established to evaluate whether these pedagogical affirmations are operative throughout the curriculum.

The above document is excerpted with permission from an article entitled, *The Interfaith Movement in a Liminal Age: The Institutionalization of a Movement*, by **Dr. Nathan R. Kollar**. To read the entire article, click here: <https://www.scarboromissions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Interfaith-movement.pdf>

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Culture?” and “How And When Might Religious Texts Be Studied In Public Schools?”

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