



From *Educating About Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement:
A Handbook for Student Affairs*

Edited by Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess, and Eboo Patel

The following is an excerpt from the unedited manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

When I (Eboo) was in my final year as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, I was asked to be part of a group of student leaders who would have a meeting with the President of the university system. It was scheduled for thirty minutes, and frankly I expected bromides about the importance of science and technology in the 21st century, fields in which Illinois excelled.

Instead, the conversation turned toward diversity issues. I'll never forget when President Stukel made the statement, "I want to be able to shake the hand of Illinois graduates and have a reasonable degree of confidence that, over the course of their undergraduate careers, they have developed multicultural literacy, built multicultural friendships, and had opportunities for multicultural leadership."

That is *precisely* what happened to me during my undergraduate years at Illinois. I had grown up as a brown kid in the western suburbs of Chicago wanting to be white, and my experience at Illinois had dramatically expanded my understanding of myself and my country.

My first year orientation group seemed to magically mirror the ethnic and racial diversity of the state, and our group leader seemed to find every opportunity to turn the conversation towards identity issues. Many of the programs that my Resident Advisor ran focused on multicultural issues, and when I was hired to be an RA, half of the training we received dealt with race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. In campus volunteer activities, gathering a diverse group of people to go do environmental cleanups and tutoring projects was always named as a high priority.

Reflecting on President Stukel's comment, I realized that *this was all by design*. The university as an institution had set a high aspiration with regards to diversity issues, and it had the power to (at least partially) program the environment so that the students might achieve that aspiration.

Student affairs played a central role in this. And not just in carrying it out, but in prioritizing the issue to begin with.

Like lots of college students who find their paradigm shifting in college, I liberally shared my experiences and points of view with my parents. Okay, I admit, sometimes these conversations turned into lectures on my part. I would constantly take my dad to task about his lack of 'people of color consciousness.' My dad was mostly good natured about all of this, but one afternoon I must have gotten under his skin, because he turned to me and said: "Eboo, the next time you want to come home and lecture me on diversity issues, you first tell me how you are going to solve religious conflict." He pointed to the front page of the newspaper sitting on our coffee table; over half the stories were about religious violence somewhere in the world.

It occurred to me that, for all the conversations I had in college about identity issues, barely any had anything to do with religion. Many of the people I knew had one belief system or

another, but they mostly kept quiet about it. It was clearly not an invited topic of conversation. And those of us who were politically engaged on campus had a kind of ambient awareness that religious conflicts were raging across the world, but we learned and talked little about them. In fact, as I thought back on my RA training, a good twenty hours was given over to identity issues. The amount of time spent on religion: zero.

That simply won't do anymore. Not for our increasingly religious diverse campuses, not for our increasingly religiously polarized country, not for our increasingly religiously violent world.

We co-editors are not the first people to recognize the need for this work. We are part of a lengthy line of educators and researchers, scholars and students who have long understood the importance of engaging religious diversity for our overall civic health. Through the past several decades, small groups of leaders throughout higher education have championed the importance of engaging religious diversity as essential to the civic mission of higher education. Like Eboo, many of us carry personal stories that drive our passion for building bridges across lines of religious and worldview difference. Others of us were the lucky few who experienced intentional educational experiences which fueled our commitment. All of us, however, recognize that in order for the possibilities of educating across lines of religious identity to realize its full potential, it must become a campus-wide endeavor. It is not enough for a religious life office or a group of interested staff to drive this effort (as essential as those energies are!); rather, it must become a campus-wide priority, which means simply that more leaders on campus must be activated to engage this work successfully.

Nevertheless, many (maybe even most!) campus professionals profess considerable discomfort with the idea of engaging religious and worldview identity. There are good reasons for this, as landmines abound when we enter into this area of identity where it seems that disagreement is around every corner. In fact, in our many years working in the area of religious diversity in higher education, the topic on which found the *most* agreement is that campus professionals profess a lack of skills and knowledge in how to do this work. Many student affairs practitioners and faculty in student affairs preparation programs agree that the work must be done, but they don't know how to begin and they are nervous about tackling such a divisive topic. This book is a direct response to this concern.

If the goal is to elevate the priority of educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement in student affairs (both in and out of the classroom), then we need to create resources to guide that work. In this book, we provide foundational knowledge, concrete teaching ideas, sample activities, and case studies all designed for use by those who work in student affairs. We hope that within these pages, student affairs practitioners and faculty will find the tools they need to increase their comfort level and enable their ability to engage this important topic both in and out of the classroom.

This book fills a gap by moving beyond the literature that explains the need for incorporating spiritual, religious, and interfaith work into student affairs by providing practical guidance for how to do this work. It also serves multiple audiences in student affairs by providing teaching ideas for practitioners who want to include a session or two about interfaith in their programs as well as ideas for student affairs faculty who may be teaching one session on this topic or a whole course. We chose to call this volume a “handbook,” because we hope it is a

resource that readers will turn to again and again, as new opportunities for religious diversity and interfaith engagement arise.

The book is divided into five sections. Part 1 provides some context that many need before diving into this work. Topics discussed in this section range from preparing to engage in interfaith topics to the most current research findings about religious diversity and interfaith engagement. A final chapter in this sections asks readers to consider the framework used to approach this work—a social justice framework that aims to highlight issues of power and privilege or an interfaith cooperation framework that aims to create religious pluralism.

Part 2 of this book provides concrete ideas for creating new courses focused on spirituality, religion, secularity, and interfaith engagement in student affairs, as well as ideas for incorporating these topics into existing courses that are typically offered in student affairs preparation programs. A final chapter suggests reflection activities that faculty in student preparation programs could adapt and use with Master’s students in or out of the classroom.

Part 3 of the book provides ideas for creating professional development opportunities for student affairs practitioners who want to learn more about engaging in this work. It also includes two chapters with concrete ideas for activities, events, and programs that can be used by student affairs educators.

Part 4 of this book includes several case studies to engage students, practitioners, and faculty in thinking about campus situations related to religious diversity. Case studies are an excellent educational tool to use in or out of the classroom, and the introductory chapter of this section provides guidance on how to use these tools.

Part 5 provides some basic information about a variety of religions and worldviews held by college students including basic information on how to support these students to create an

inclusive campus. Our hope is that these chapters provide a modicum of religious literacy, which we have heard many individuals seek as they aim to better engage the religious diversity present on their campus.

We anticipate that many student affairs practitioners and faculty in student affairs preparation programs will use the practical advice and tools in this book to increase educational opportunities focused on religious diversity and interfaith engagement. We also hope that this is just the beginning of “how-to” resources and it will be followed by a proliferation of additional conferences, articles, books, and professional development opportunities focused on educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement in student affairs.

Campuses have the opportunity to be laboratories and launching pads for a new kind of ethic and a new kind of leader. In the 1980s and 1990s, student affairs staffs led the way by advocating for multiculturalism. That movement changed higher education, and the United States. It is time to include religious identity in that mix. This handbook is a contribution toward that end.

Kathleen M. Goodman, Miami University
Mary Ellen Giess, Interfaith Youth Core
Eboo Patel, Interfaith Youth Core