

U.S. Religious Diversity and International Students

BEFORE LEAVING FOR THE UNITED STATES, students from abroad already know they will be coming to a large and diverse nation. Even so, once here, they may find the great variety of elements in American culture, many of them reflected on college campuses, difficult to comprehend and deal with. And because one of the most sensitive aspects of culture is religious belief and practices (which often influences social and political values), introducing international students to the diversity of religious faiths in the United States is an important challenge for college administrators. It is a challenge they approach in many different ways.

The Religious Landscape in the United States

In 2008 the Pew Research Center issued a fascinating report on the U.S. religious landscape, detailing that religious affiliation in the United States is both very diverse and extremely fluid. If shifts within Protestantism are included, about 44 percent of adults have “either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.” Among the foreign-born adult population, Catholics outnumber Protestants by nearly a two-to-one margin. Immigrants are also disproportionately represented among several world religions in the United States, including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The report describes the constant movement of the American religious scene, pointing out that immigration is adding even more diversity to the American religious mosaic: “Muslims, roughly two-thirds of whom are immigrants, account for roughly 0.6 percent of the U.S. adult population; and Hindus, more than eight-in-ten of whom are foreign born, now account for approximately 0.4 percent of the population.” Like the broader country around them, college communities also reflect religious heterogeneity, and the presence of international students—like immigrants in the general population—adds to the diversity of religions on

campus and serves as a natural way to educate about various religious beliefs and practices in this country as around the world.

International Offices and Orientation Activities

“Increasingly international offices are under pressure to focus on high-impact areas where students need information quite quickly to make a successful adjustment and transition to campus life,” says Ivor Emmanuel, director of the University of California-Berkeley’s international office. He speaks from experience at the University of Illinois and Berkeley, both large campuses, the latter with hundreds of student organizations. Anita Gaines, director of the International Student and Scholar Services Office (ISSSO) at the University of Houston, makes a similar point: “We are one of the two most ethnically diverse major research universities in the nation [the other is Rutgers], with international students from 132 countries. We focus on helping international students with their legal status. During orientation we cover topics to assist them with campus and city acclimation.” In an institution like the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), Elizabeth Matthews, director of the institutions’ international center, points out that with 3,000 international students, one-on-one advising is usually on issues related to immigration.

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The multiple pressing demands on international offices means that many work with other institutional units on matters involving religion. Orientation activities provide one frequent occasion for doing this. Houston’s ISSSO organizes a well-attended Information Fair for new international students who have a chance to circulate and get information at booths representing some of the 40 international/ethnic organizations and more than 45 religious organizations on campus. Houston’s International Office also actively participates in Diversity Week and International Education Week, with the assistance of campus organizations. At Gannon University, a private Catholic diocesan university, the International Student Office invites the campus ministry staff and chaplain and the director of the Center for Social Concerns to take part in orientation; they distribute the institution’s mission statement emphasizing inclusiveness and cultural diversity and explain that their roles are not only to lead prayer but to be a resource for any student who may not feel comfortable discussing problems with a medical person. As part of the international student orientation at the University of Notre Dame near South Bend, Indiana (founded by the Catholic priests of the Congregation of Holy Cross), the International Student Services and Activities (ISSA) unit is offering a workshop called “Catholicism 101,” an introduction to the Catholic life and character of the institution. “Since many of our international students are not Catholic, this session will help students to have an understanding of what to expect during their studies at Notre Dame,” says Bethany Burgan, director of ISSA.

Gatherings to Talk and Pray

The IIT International Center sponsors an activity called *Talk Time*, an event that the institution’s Office of Spiritual Services promotes to student organizations. The series began about three years ago, is part of the English conversation program, and deals with a different topic every month. Each semester features one *Talk Time* on religion and according to Akiko Selmon, assistant director of the International Center at IIT, it is one of the most successful topics of the series. Sessions include 5–10 domestic students and 40–50 international students and are built around a set of questions. The full group may hear a presentation on holidays or religious events of the season and then break into smaller groups, each with native English speakers (students or faculty) who facilitate the conversation built around a set of sample questions for participants to ask and discuss. Among the sample questions are:

- Do you practice a religion?
- Do you believe in God?
- Do you believe in an afterlife?
- What does religion mean to you?
- Do you pray? How do you pray?
- Do people choose their religion or do people’s parents choose it?
- Do young people practice a religion in your country?
- How often do you go to a church, temple, shrine, etc?
- Have you visited a church, temple, shrine, etc. in the United States?
- Would you consider marrying someone with a different religion?
- Would you ever consider changing religions? Or if you do not currently practice a religion, would you ever consider joining one? Why or why not?
- Do science and religion fit well together?
- What are the upcoming religious holidays you celebrate?
- How do you celebrate the holiday?
- Are there any specific foods you will serve during the celebration?
- Do you know any religious holidays in the United States?

Selmon says: “It’s hard for foreign nationals to talk about religion. They have questions and this gives them a setting to ask them. A Chinese student may not be Christian but may want to understand Christmas.” “We have introduced this as a time to share and be open,” says Matthews. “A Chinese student may say ‘I’m an atheist’ and then when talking about how their grandparents revere their ancestors, come to realize that the family does have spiritual values,” she adds. Many Chinese and South Korean students attend the *Talk Time* sessions, as do students from India and the Middle East.

Constance Peterson-Miller, now director of international student services at Indiana University at South Bend, was director of the International Student Office at Gannon, one of only eight universities and colleges still administered through a diocese. Of Gannon she says, “We have a wonderful collaboration with our ministry,” she says. “The chaplain’s office has appointed an international student liaison to our office so we can work together in providing support for other faith traditions and organize various educational programs. This liaison and I and a professor of history and representatives from the Muslim student association and the Center for Student Concerns organized a Muslim Dialogue, with question and answer time. We hope to have a Hindu–Christian dialogue in the future,” says Peterson-Miller. The intention of the dialogues is to open communication in a very public way, to get rid of misapprehensions, remove stereotypes, and foster the idea of cooperation and collaboration.

Notre Dame also has interfaith dialogues. The Campus Ministry’s Interfaith Dialogue group meets several times per semester over a meal, seeking to create a community where people of all faith backgrounds feel welcome. The dinners and discussions are open to all students.

Another approach at Notre Dame is the Prayer Around the World series, initiated about seven years ago by a student who wanted to reach out to all graduate students, only 50 percent of whom are Catholic. In this case, it was decided that the most effective

approach would be to show how people pray in different faith traditions. Attendance now includes graduates and undergraduates, domestic and international students, and ranges from about 12 to 75 students. Usually three sessions are offered in the spring and three in the fall, with each type of prayer covered once a year. The Campus Ministry runs the program, with ISSA as one of the cosponsors.

Events and Accommodations Around Holidays

Berkeley's International House is a residence for about 575 students, mostly graduate, with some 27 percent U.S. nationals or green card holders. In an effort to penetrate beneath the surface impressions of the diverse cultures at I-House, Liliane Koziol, director of programs there, created a series of Ritual Dinners. They involve about 40 people, one-third from the host culture and two-thirds from as many other cultural backgrounds as possible. Meals involve an explanation of foods and rituals or special celebrations

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(religious or secular). Some of the religion-focused ritual dinners have included a Mexican Christmas Posada tradition, Chanukah celebration, the breaking of the fast during Ramadan, and a traditional Passover Jewish Seder dinner following an interfaith Jewish Sabbath service at the Berkeley Hillel.

A number of other institutions organize events around holidays such as Easter, with

egg painting and explanations of what Easter means to different peoples. Religious holidays may involve special dietary rituals and several institutions make accommodations. I-House at Berkeley, for example, facilitates fasting during Ramadan by putting meals into refrigerators so that food is available after sunset and before sunrise, allowing practicing Muslim students to eat before going to class.

Special Locations On and Off Campus

Several institutions interviewed have set aside meditation space for Muslim prayer. Others use architectural structures on campus to introduce students to various aspects of religion: Each semester, Gannon offers a tour of its Catholic Cathedral; Notre Dame has a large basilica that students visit; Houston has the A.D. Bruce Religion Center with two chapels and several programs and activities that deal with religious issues. Many institutions organize excursions to off-campus locations, arranging visits to

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community mosques, for example, or synagogues, or African American churches.

Every year, I-House at Berkeley selects a theme for its Globalization Lecture Series. To match one such theme, which was Unity in Diversity, Koziol says: "I created a program of community exploration involving guided visits to diverse local churches, temples, and other sites of worship to offer residents and members the chance to discover the sources of beliefs and practices that distinguish us as unique individuals while experiencing the profound spiritual instincts that bind us into one common family. The title of this program, designed to promote awareness of the rich diversity of faiths and forms of worship in the Bay Area, was Religious Communities: Cross-Cultural Explorations. The guided site visits included the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, the San Francisco Glide Memorial Church, a Native American Sweat Lodge, and the Beth Eden Baptist Church, a leading East Bay African American house of worship."

Religiously Affiliated Institutions

Institutions with religious affiliations work closely with campus ministries. The Office of Campus Ministry at Notre Dame publishes two brochures describing the university as "A Home for Students of All Faiths" and detailing various outreach efforts to those from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious traditions as well as individuals from various cultural backgrounds. From direct accounts, the efforts are successful. Notre Dame's Burgan says: "All students, regardless of origin, are a part of the Notre Dame family and are welcomed as family...Of interest to our [ISSA] department is ensuring that international students do not feel pressured to profess a particular faith during or as a result of their studies here...The Prayer from Around the World series provides a forum for international students to share their non-Catholic faith practices with the wider student community, should they wish. Several cultural events throughout the year also include elements of prayerful, non-Catholic celebration. These events enrich the greater community." Notre Dame's Priscilla Wong,

associate director for administration and cross cultural ministry, recounts that a graduate student from Pakistan expressed her comfort in the environment, one in which she senses the tolerance and, because faith is celebrated, in which she feels welcome.

Peterson-Miller acknowledges that many people are indifferent to religion but feels that being at Gannon, a religious institution that is very open to engagement with other faiths, made it easier to educate international

students about the diversity of religions in the United States: "Our own faith practice is greatly enhanced through these dialogues. I have felt it has been ideal; it's literally our calling to honor cultural diversity in all aspects." **IE**

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