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Why International Educators Should Care about Interfaith

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INTRODUCTION

Missing in discussions within the frameworks of diversity, equity, and inclusion; global leadership; faculty and staff capacity-building; and good practices for international student orientation within the college setting is the subject of interfaith competencies. This piece examines this oversight and proposes how to address it, while highlighting what some institutions are doing.



A few months ago, we had the privilege of facilitating a workshop at a national global learning conference, Enhancing Interfaith Competencies for Success in a Global Work Environment. The workshop focused on the increasing importance of interfaith competencies in the workforce and the need for employees who can collaborate with religiously and ideologically diverse colleagues. Recent research suggests that Americans are more likely to encounter worldview diversity at work than in other facets of their lives given that “a majority of Americans [...] frequently interact with people who do not share their political party (53%) or religion (51%) at work” (Igoe, 2019). Accordingly, college graduates should expect to encounter religious diversity at work—but are they adequately preparing for effective interfaith engagement with peers, supervisors, clients, and community members?

Most college students report limited participation in opportunities that challenge them to negotiate worldview¹ differences (Mayhew, et al., 2016). As a result, they are likely not gaining adequate knowledge and tools to excel in religiously diverse workplaces (Rockenbach et al., 2020). This engagement issue may be intertwined with a lack of awareness or preparation among educators. At the conference we attended, interfaith competencies were not addressed in diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks, global leadership discussions, available faculty and staff capacity-building opportunities, or recommended practices for international student orientation. A lack of interest or perceived relevance among educators may also be at play, as evidenced by the small number of attendees at our conference session. We have seen challenges related to both awareness of, and interest in, interfaith skill-building emerge in some of our consulting work at Interfaith America (a national non-profit located in Chicago, Illinois, USA that inspires, equips, and connects leaders and institutions to unlock the potential of religious diversity).

Our conference session focused on the importance of preparing students to work with others from across the globe, but there are also ways that interfaith engagement can improve experiences among students from across the globe—namely, international students on U.S. campuses. Recent research suggests that international students at U.S. institutions feel less welcomed and experience more insensitivity related to their worldviews when compared to their peers (Staples, Dahl, Mayhew, & Rockenbach, 2019). When Janett attended a different conference addressing

¹ Worldview: “a guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, nonreligious perspective, or some combination of these” (Rockenbach et al., 2016).



contemporary issues and the development of senior international officers in higher education, she noted a disconnect between stated priorities and actual support services for international students. Culture was commonly named in workshops and plenaries when discussing the importance of understanding global contexts; yet knowledge of religion, spirituality, or ways other of knowing was not discussed as a tool for better serving international students. For domestic students and international educators alike, there is an opportunity to create a more welcoming campus for international students by learning to navigate worldview diversity well.

The American Council on Education's Comprehensive Internationalization plan and the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Global Learning Value Rubric, two associations in the field of internationalization and global citizenship, articulate the importance of cultural diversity, ethical and interfaith engagement, and worldview diversity. It is unclear how these priorities take shape on specific campuses through intentional multicultural experiences that address worldview; opportunities for interfaith engagement; or spaces for students, faculty, and staff to develop skills for navigating diversity related to religion, spirituality, or ways of knowing. However, tremendous opportunities exist for those leading international efforts on their campuses to engage worldview diversity in productive ways. To this end, we offer several examples from the field that could motivate and inspire increased engagement among international education professionals:

Consider our campus partners at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU), an internationally recognized leader in aviation and aerospace education. ERAU is preparing their students for careers in aviation and aerospace by developing both knowledge of different worldview traditions and skills to respectfully engage and cooperate in complex and nuanced situations (Cordoves & Whitehead, 2022) that include their religiously diverse teams and customers. Educators at ERAU know that to be an excellent aviation professional, one needs to have a radar screen for religious diversity and how it affects the services they provide.

Dr. Joset Brown, assistant professor in the undergraduate nursing program at William Paterson University, notes that "we often underplay the role that religion and faith has on the lives of our patients and their healing process ... and that we, as educators, must prepare caregivers to interact and have dialogue with their clients and other providers who present with culture and beliefs that differ from our own." Accordingly, she has integrated a focus on religious diversity in some of her nursing



courses to challenge students to think about how to address, and be responsive to, people's diverse beliefs (Brown et al., 2020).

Hillel International is a non-profit that supports young adults' Jewish learning, social justice engagement, peer connections, and understanding of the global Jewish people (Hillel, n.d.). There are over 800 Hillel offices on USA campuses that support Jewish students with programming and community building. During the pandemic, many Hillel offices transitioned from in-person to virtual seders—a ritual focused on sharing the story and learnings of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt that is facilitated differently depending on location. This offering created the opportunity for domestic and international students to share a meal and a tradition across geographical and cultural lines.

CONCLUSION

Initiatives like these are compelling and are growing in number, but they are not commonplace. Rather, they signal the need and potential for higher education to do more, not only by supporting students of diverse worldviews during college, but also by preparing them to competently navigate religious diversity after they graduate. International educators are positioned to play critical leadership roles in interfaith spaces and should be more engaged in developing strategies to proactively address religion, spirituality, and ways of knowing on campus. It is essential to prioritize retention and belonging for all students, including our international students, who are part of our communities. At the same time, we must think proactively about the professional spaces our students will enter upon graduation and adequately prepare them for the myriad ideas, identities, and worldviews they will encounter there. We believe there is also an opportunity for international educators to play a critical role building students' interfaith competencies for success in the global work environment.

AUTHORS

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