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## In Our Time: Advancing Interfaith Studies Curricula at Catholic Colleges and Universities

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## IN OUR TIME: ADVANCING INTERFAITH STUDIES CURRICULA AT CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Eboo Patel, Noah Silverman & Kristi Del Vecchio

*People who orient around religion differently are interacting with greater frequency than ever before. These interactions, especially in the context of college and university campuses, require young people to grapple with their own identities in ways that previous generations could more easily avoid. Conversations about religious diversity have become elevated at colleges and universities, which has led Drs. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen to claim that religion is “no longer invisible” in the context of American higher education.*

*As an organization that works with hundreds of American colleges and universities every year, Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) believes that Catholic institutions are not only well-equipped to engage in interfaith conversation, but already are on the vanguard of this work. Interfaith efforts are particularly salient within Catholic Higher Education curriculum, where Interfaith and Interreligious Studies courses and programs are being established. As these exciting academic programs continue to take shape across the country, we recommend that scholars and educators continue to consider professional applicability, attention to intersectionality, and assessment as three important practices to adopt in their Interfaith and Interreligious Studies programs.*

### HANNAH’S STORY

In the fall of 2008, Hannah Minks was a fairly typical first-year, first-generation college student beginning her undergraduate career at Dominican University, a Catholic institution located in River Forest, Illinois. As a lifelong resident of Akron, Ohio, Hannah was enjoying the transition to living in this busier, energetic Chicago suburb. As a lifelong Catholic, Hannah was also thrilled to be studying at a place that she believed would nurture and help to grow her religious identity.

During her first semester at Dominican, Hannah enrolled in an introductory theology course with Dr. Jeff Carlson, a theology professor who Hannah knew to be a committed Catholic as well. As the course progressed, Hannah became impressed by the comments of a fellow student, Adam, who seemed to be reading and considering the course material as deeply as she was. While Adam sometimes challenged the arguments in the course texts, he did so thoughtfully and with respect. Hannah and Adam began to sit next to each other in class and planned to study together to prepare for their exams.

While studying one evening in the library, Hannah and Adam’s discussion focused on one of the topics covered in the course: Catholic perspectives on death. Suddenly, Hannah realized that Adam was not Catholic. Adam explained to Hannah that, while he found the Catholic concept of death reassuring, he just did not believe in it. He found himself drawn more to the “masters of suspicion” – Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – that were also part of their assigned reading for the course. When Hannah asked him why, Adam told her that he did not actually believe in God – he identified as an atheist. Hannah recalled him saying, “I know that being an atheist isn’t exactly the norm here, but studying theology is a way for me to think about my own values and beliefs. I just don’t ultimately accept the Catholic perspective and am drawn more to the atheist philosophers that we’ve discussed in class.”

Hannah recalled that after their study session, she felt profoundly uncertain about the future of her friendship with Adam. Until that point, she had appreciated his perspective and the time they had spent together in class; now she found herself wondering if it was in her best interest as a Catholic to continue growing her friendship with him. After all, could not her friendship with Adam be viewed as a tacit endorsement of his heretical views? Or worse, what if Adam’s principled atheism caused Hannah to question and potentially lose her own faith? The next day after the exam, Hannah decided to schedule an appointment with Dr. Carlson, assuming that if anyone would have figured this out, it would be someone who has studied Catholic theology for the majority of his life.

During her meeting with Dr. Carlson, Hannah described the conversation she had with Adam, and confessed that she felt conflicted about their friendship. Seeking guidance, she asked Dr. Carlson about his perspective on this conundrum. To her surprise, Dr. Carlson told Hannah that interfaith friendships are worthwhile, and that she should pursue them – not *despite* being Catholic, but *because* she is Catholic. Dr. Carlson spent the next hour talking with Hannah about his own personal theology of interfaith cooperation, which he said was rooted in the Catholic tradition. He told Hannah about important Church teachings and documents that encourage relationships with people who orient around religion differently<sup>1</sup>, and recommended that Hannah consider reading some of these

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<sup>1</sup> In our work, we often talk about religious or worldview diversity as people who “orient around religion differently.” Although imperfect, we intend this language to be inclusive of those who identify as religious, spiritual but not religious, agnostic, humanist, or atheist, or those who identify with multiple traditions. We intend this phrase also to be inclusive of *intrafaith* dynamics (denominations, or simply viewpoints, within one tradition, e.g. between Methodists and Baptists, or liberal Muslims and conservative Muslims), as people may still identify with the same broad religious tradition yet “orient” distinctly around different tenets and practices.

texts. Then Dr. Carlson shared more about some of the interfaith friendships that he himself had forged over the years through his work building interfaith bridges and running interfaith programs around the Chicago area. As their conversation came to a close, Hannah left his office both relieved and inspired, and immediately sought out Adam, the friend with whom she was most excited to discuss what she had learned.

### THE INTERFAITH YOUTH CORE AND “THE PLURIFORM ERA”

Hannah’s experience at Dominican University is not unique. Many American undergraduates arrive on campus and, for the first time, find themselves both outside of the religious communities in which they grew up and confronted by new forms of religious and non-religious diversity. Indeed, all across the country, people who orient around religion differently are interacting with greater frequency than ever before (2010, Putnam and Campbell), and nowhere are these interactions more apparent and more potentially transformative than on the U.S.’s approximately 3,000 four-year residential colleges and universities. The reality of these increased interactions, taking place both in person and online, require young people to grapple with their own identities in ways that previous generations could more easily avoid. Such dynamics on college and university campuses – and the profound soul-searching they often engender – are only one dimension of what Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen call “the pluriform era” of religion in American higher education in their exhaustive study and book, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*. They argue that the era in which religion was privatized and went unengaged on campuses has come to an end. The combination of increased religious diversity on campuses, the embrace of multiculturalism by higher education more broadly, and the visibility of religious controversy in global and national politics has made the proactive and positive engagement of interfaith issues a necessity. The Jacobsens explain that “paying attention to religion in higher education today is not at all a matter of imposing faith or morality on anyone; it is a matter of responding intelligently to the questions of life that students find themselves necessarily asking as they try to make sense of themselves and the world in an era of ever-increasing social, intellectual and religious complexity” (2012, p. 30).

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a Chicago-based nonprofit whose vision is to make interfaith cooperation a social norm, works to foster more of the kind of positive engagement with religious diversity that Hannah was ultimately able to experience with Adam, thanks to guidance from Dr. Carlson. We realize this vision by partnering with higher education institutions that are working to turn religious diversity into a positive force in our society. Drawing upon our work with hundreds of these campuses over the past fifteen years, we have distilled our experiences in the field into nine provisional “leadership practices for interfaith excellence in higher education” that, notwithstanding the particularities of individual institutional

contexts, comprise what we believe to be clear patterns of effectiveness. These practices include 1) establishing links between interfaith engagement and the institution’s identity and mission; 2) developing a campus-wide strategy for interfaith engagement; 3) establishing interfaith engagement as part of the institution’s public identity; 4) respecting and accommodating diverse religious identities and practices; 5) making interfaith cooperation an academic priority; 6) building interfaith competence and capacity among staff and faculty; 7) encouraging student leadership; 8) engaging in campus-community partnerships; and 9) assessing interfaith initiatives and the campus climate overall vis-à-vis interfaith initiatives (2015, Patel, Bringman Baxter, and Silverman).

It is significant to note that, among the hundreds of colleges and universities with whom we work every year, IFYC has found that Catholic institutions are not only well-equipped to engage in such leadership practices, but are consistently on the vanguard of this work. In this article, we will explore some of the reasons why Catholic Higher Education has had disproportionate success in modeling these practices in general. We then focus on one practice in particular – making interfaith cooperation an academic priority – in which we have seen Catholic Higher Education, through the development of new academic programs in the nascent field of *Interfaith and Interreligious Studies*, truly pioneer models that are quickly becoming the benchmark in the burgeoning field. Finally, as these exciting academic programs continue to take shape across the country, we pivot to recommending three engaged pedagogies to which we believe scholars and educators in Catholic Higher Education should continue to attend as they further develop Interfaith and Interreligious Studies courses and programs.

### CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: ON THE VANGUARD OF INTERFAITH EXCELLENCE

While, as the Jacobsens document, higher education institutions of all stripes are increasingly and appropriately paying attention to the increased interaction among students who orient around religion differently, Catholic institutions are especially equipped to take matters of religious diversity seriously and have been on the vanguard of this movement. In the opening story, we saw how Jeff Carlson’s conversation with Hannah helped steer her encounter of diversity toward both a deeper understanding of her own Catholic identity *and* a richer interfaith encounter. This was not mere fortuitousness. Dr. Carlson has spent his career at Catholic Higher Education institutions – first the University of St. Thomas (MN), then DePaul University in Chicago, and now Dominican University – that cherished both their Catholic heritage and embraced creating a welcoming campus for students of diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Some scholars and Catholic Higher Education leaders have argued that this kind of theological openness is central to the

Catholic faith. Mark Laboe, DePaul University's Associate Vice President of University Ministry, stated this succinctly: "It's in our DNA to be open to other religions" (2016, Zimmerman). Laboe shared this sentiment at an event co-hosted by IFYC and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in January of 2016 called *Interfaith Cooperation: Leadership Practices at Catholic Colleges and Universities*. The cornerstone – or "DNA" – of this openness is the well-known 1965 Church document *Nostra Aetate*, which famously called for "dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions" for the goodwill of the world (1965, Pope Paul VI). No doubt, Dr. Carlson referenced theological statements such as *Nostra Aetate* when making the "Catholic case" for Hannah's interfaith friendship.

As part of the broader Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (sometimes called "Vatican II"), the impact of *Nostra Aetate* on the Catholic Church can hardly be overstated. Not only did it explicitly sanction interreligious collaboration that led to concrete action and reconciliation within and across various communities – including, significantly, Catholic-Jewish relations – but it also meaningfully opened up new pathways of Catholic theology. After the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, we see prominent Catholic theologians such as Paul Knitter and Hans Küng explicitly dedicate their scholarship to the topic of interreligious collaboration and relationship. Today, Catholic theologians such as Catherine Cornille and Francis Clooney continue to advance this area of scholarship in innovative and nuanced ways, including the development of a new field called comparative theology.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to formal Church documents such as *Nostra Aetate*, alongside the scholarship of Catholic theologians such as Knitter, Küng, Cornille, and Clooney over the past half-century, Catholic institutions of higher education are well-equipped to engage in interfaith work.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Catholic Higher Education is not only theologically well-equipped to engage in interfaith efforts, but are already on the vanguard of doing this work. This reality is well captured in a 2012 *New York Times* piece "Muslims From Abroad Are Thriving in Catholic Colleges," which profiles about a half-dozen Catholic institutions and discusses their commitment to creating welcoming spaces for non-Catholics (2012, Perez-Pena). The article notes that this has manifested concretely in enrollment numbers, where the percentage of Muslim students attending Catholic colleges and universities has doubled (or in some cases, tripled) over the past decade. While enrollment numbers tell an impressive story, the testimonials from Muslim students themselves are equally powerful. One Muslim student at Creighton University is quoted saying, "I like the fact that there's faith, even if it's not my faith, and I feel my faith is respected... I don't have to leave my faith at home when I come to school" (2012, Perez-Pena, para. 8).

<sup>2</sup> To further explore their work on this topic, see Catherine Cornille's *im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (2008) and Francis Clooney's edited volume *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (2010).

The story told in this *New York Times* piece is reinforced in IFYC's experience, as well. As an organization that partners with institutions of higher learning to advance interfaith cooperation across the US, IFYC works with a disproportionately high number of Catholic institutions. Of the approximately 3,000-plus four-year institutions of higher learning in the US, IFYC works closely with about 340 each year. Of those 340 institutions, around 65 (or about 20%) are affiliated with the Catholic Church. Considering that only 210 (or about 7%) of the country's undergraduate colleges and universities are Catholic, it is clear to us as an organization that Catholic institutions are particularly eager to advance interfaith cooperation on their campuses.

## INTERFAITH CURRICULA AT CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

From our work with about 65 Catholic colleges and universities across the country, IFYC has found that Catholic institutions are particularly invested in integrating interfaith topics in the classroom and curriculum. In the academy more broadly, this is taking shape as a nascent field or sub-discipline in spaces like the American Academy of Religion, where it is referred to as "Interreligious and Interfaith Studies."<sup>3</sup> While scholars are still determining the scope of this burgeoning academic field, Interfaith Studies can in broad strokes be described as an interdisciplinary field that examines the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another, along with the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics (2013, Patel).

While this emerging field draws upon related fields like Comparative Religion or Comparative Theology, a growing group of scholars see Interfaith Studies as a distinct field. The primary reason for this distinction is that Interfaith Studies focuses primarily on the complex and nuanced interactions of people who orient around religion differently in a variety of different settings. As a result, Interfaith Studies draws upon the methodologies and findings of disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, History, Political Science, Education, Business, and even the hard sciences. While Interfaith Studies draws upon a rigorous comparison of differing traditions (Comparative Religion), as well as theological explorations of diverse traditions toward the end of greater understanding (Comparative Theology), its focus expands beyond the parameters of these two disciplines. For example, a scholar in the field of Interfaith Studies might wish to study the joint efforts that Reform Jewish and Catholic Christian congregations

<sup>3</sup> "Interreligious and Interfaith Studies" is the title that a recognized group within the American Academy of Religion has adopted. We have found that some institutions prefer to use the term "interfaith," while others prefer "interreligious." While it could be argued that these terms carry distinct connotations, Dr. Oddbjørn Leirvik notes that these terms are often used interchangeably. (See his 2014 text *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*).

are taking to pass legislation on a local climate change issue. In this example, the central research interest is the explicit and productive interaction of area-specific Jews and Christians, but to understand the full picture requires a willingness to explore the scenario's intersecting issues and disciplines (Environmental Studies/Biology, Political Science, Sociology, etc.).

At undergraduate institutions in particular, Interfaith and Interreligious Studies is integrated into the curriculum through academic courses and programs, such as minors, concentrations, and even majors.<sup>4</sup> Catholic colleges and universities are on the vanguard of creating academic programs of this type. Perhaps it is of little surprise that the professor in our opening story, Dr. Jeff Carlson of Dominican University, was a primary institutional leader in creating one of the nation's first Interfaith Studies minors. This academic program at Dominican University exemplifies two particularly important aspects of Interfaith Studies mentioned above: interdisciplinarity and real-world applications. After a required introductory course, students are asked to select three elective courses from a wide range of disciplines, including History, English, Philosophy, Political Science, Business, Sociology, Communication Studies, and Chemistry. After completing the required coursework, the students are then given the opportunity to witness the real-world applications of Interfaith Studies through a capstone internship experience (2016, Dominican University).

In addition to Dominican University, IFYC has had the privilege of partnering with a number of other Catholic institutions to create academic programs in Interfaith and Interreligious Studies or Interfaith Leadership Studies. Benedictine University (Lisle, IL), Loyola University (Chicago, IL), and Saint Mary's College of California (Moraga, CA) are three Catholic institutions that have already launched academic programs of this type. An impressive number of additional Catholic institutions are currently in the process of creating similar programs, including Cabrini College (Randor, PA), Regis University (Denver, CO), the University of Saint Joseph (West Hartford, CT), and the University of Saint Thomas (St. Paul, MN). Many of these programs, such as the one at Dominican University, combine interdisciplinary classroom-based study with opportunities for experiential learning, particularly through site visits, service-learning, or internship programs.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERFAITH STUDIES CURRICULA

While Interfaith Studies curricula continue to take shape at Catholic Higher Education institutions in impressive ways, we recognize that improvements can always be made. In our work

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<sup>4</sup> The nation's first Interfaith Leadership Major - established at Elizabethtown College (Elizabethtown, PA) - was profiled in the *New York Times* in 2016. See a full citation for Freedman's "A Laboratory for Interfaith Studies in Pennsylvania Dutch Country" below.

with other colleges and universities on their curricular interfaith efforts - not just at Catholic institutions - we have come to find that a few important practices are on the cutting edge within Interfaith Studies courses and programs: a focus on professional applicability, attention to intersectionality, and the inclusion of assessment practices. While we would recommend these practices be adopted within interfaith-focused courses and programs at Catholic colleges and universities, these three practices are general recommendations for the future of Interfaith Studies curricula in higher education more broadly.

The first recommendation, a focus on professional applicability in Interfaith Studies curricula, is perhaps one of the leading concerns of our institutional partners.<sup>5</sup> While interdisciplinary in scope, Interfaith Studies programs tend to be "housed" within humanities disciplines (one notable exception being the Interfaith Leadership minor at Saint Mary's College of California, which is housed in the School of Economics and Business Administration). Insofar as this continues to be the norm, we are aware that the humanities - and the liberal arts more generally - are coming under increased scrutiny for their lack of direct career viability (2014, Schawbel). One striking theme to emerge from the development of Interfaith Studies thus far is its latent potential to provide a bridge between traditional liberal arts education and undergraduate preparation for the professions. The study of how people who orient around religion differently interact has intrinsic value for human understanding and flourishing, but it also has real-world and ever more necessary applications in fields as varied as Healthcare, Education, and Business.

In some Interfaith and Interreligious Studies programs, professional applicability is achieved through robust internships. Through internship programs, students are given the opportunity to research how interfaith skill sets and competencies may improve a particular company or organization's work.<sup>6</sup> Having now worked in a semi-professional capacity at this internship, students can include this experience on their résumé and ask their internship supervisor for recommendation letters during a job search. Outside of internships, in other courses students are asked to interview professionals working in their field to see where issues of religious and philosophical diversity are already present. An assignment like this allows students to draw more explicit connections between interfaith competencies and a

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<sup>5</sup> Responding to this interest throughout higher education, IFYC has come to better understand the exciting ways in which interfaith skill sets are applicable in professional settings through three different research initiatives. Read more about these research findings in our online resource, "Professional Applications of Interfaith Skill Sets and Competencies," accessible at <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/professional-applications-interfaith-skill-sets-and-competencies>.

<sup>6</sup> Created in partnership with scholars and educators, IFYC has published an online resource called "Internships in Interfaith and Interreligious Studies," which features descriptions of three different internship opportunities housed within academic programs. Accessible at <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/internships-interfaith-and-interreligious-studies>.

diversity of professional pursuits. Toward the end of helping students prepare for their future job searches and careers, a focus on professional applicability is therefore our first recommendation.

Our second recommendation, attention to intersectionality, is also in response to trends taking place in the academy more broadly. For the purposes of this article, we are defining intersectionality as the interconnected and sometimes inseparable social categorizations such as gender identity, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic identity, age, class status, education level, and the like.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as Interfaith Studies concerns itself with religious or non-religious identity, it is important to consider the ways in which one's worldview may be influenced by other identity categorizations. A Muslim-Christian dialogue will look fundamentally different, for example, between Sunni Muslim American refugees and black Baptist Christians than it would between middle-aged Muslim women and male Catholic clergy. How might the added nuance of race, religious denomination, age, and gender in these examples add further complexity to the interfaith dialogue or project at hand? As the field of Interfaith Studies progresses, educators should consider it worthwhile to explore the important implications of these intersections within their classrooms and scholarship.

Finally, our last recommendation is for Interfaith Studies courses and programs to be assessed in a more rigorous way. That is to say, what are the specific learning outcomes for the course or program, and what are measurable ways to determine whether these learning outcomes have been achieved?<sup>8</sup> While also a general trend within higher education, the impetus for naming assessment has more to do with the fact that it is not done enough, or with enough attention, within this particular area of study. This is, in part, almost certainly due to the fact that interfaith learning outcomes are often qualitative in nature and thus more difficult to concretely measure. Understanding the difficulty of executing this recommendation, IFYC has published online resources around creating learning outcomes and following assessment cycles, as well as sample learning outcomes for Interfaith and Interreligious Studies that are already being utilized in academic programs across the country.<sup>9</sup> The spirit of this

recommendation is to encourage scholars and educators to take pride in the successes of their work, while also being conscious of where improvements can be made.

## CONCLUSION

Nearly five years since her graduation from Dominican University, Hannah remains engaged in the Catholic community both personally and professionally. She teaches theology at an all-girl's Catholic high-school in Ohio. True to Dr. Carlson's advice, she is able to create interfaith spaces in her classroom not despite being a Catholic, but because she is one.

Recently, Hannah was sitting alone in her classroom preparing for the next period to begin, when suddenly a guest appeared at the door. The guest introduced herself as the mother of Rachel, one of the students in Hannah's class. While running an errand in the area, the mother wanted to stop by to tell Hannah how grateful Rachel is to have her as a teacher. She said, "As one of the only Jewish families in town, Rachel was afraid she wouldn't fit in very easily – especially at a Catholic school. Of all places, she's found solace in your theology class, where you create the space for her to talk about her religion, just like all of the other students."

As Hannah's story exemplifies, one of the goals of interfaith curriculum is to nurture interfaith leaders: people who create spaces, organize social processes, and craft conversations such that people who orient around religion differently can live a common life together (2016, Patel). We see that Dr. Carlson was an interfaith leader in his role as a scholar and educator, who in turn was able to mentor Hannah toward a similar direction. Now as a professional, Hannah clearly exemplifies the traits of an interfaith leader in her role as a teacher in a Catholic high school. Before entering this profession, however, a Catholic university provided Hannah with the skills she needed to create a welcoming environment for a Jewish student in her classroom. In this way, Dominican University is a case study of a Catholic institution committed to interfaith engagement – particularly in the classroom and curriculum – where a professor like Dr. Jeff Carlson was able to solidify a student's commitment to interfaith work *and* Catholicism.

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- [assessment-cycle-interfaith-programming](#); Creating Interfaith Learning Outcomes: <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/creating-interfaith-learning-outcomes>; and Student Learning Outcomes for Interfaith and Interreligious Studies: <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/student-learning-outcomes-interfaith-and-interreligious-studies>.

<sup>7</sup> We are aware that the term "intersectionality" is used by various academic disciplines, and thus defined in a number of different ways. Authors Katherine Castiello Jones, Joya Misra, and K. McCurley in a 2013 *Sociologists for Women in Society* fact sheet articulate three common models for defining and approaching intersectionality: Inclusion/Voice Models, Relational/Process Models, and Systemic/Anticategorical Models. We best see intersectionality as it relates to Interfaith and Interreligious Studies through a Relational/Process Model. See a full citation for this article below.

<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this article, we are defining learning outcomes as statements of the knowledge, understanding, and/or skills students are expected to gain by participating in a learning process. (See Declan Kennedy, *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: a Practical Guide*), a full citation for which is below.

<sup>9</sup> See the following online resources published by IFYC: Using the Assessment Cycle in Interfaith Programming: <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/using->

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