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Implementing Inclusive Interfaith Assessment: Considerations and Challenges

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Abstract

Addressing the inclusivity of culturally relevant evaluation and interfaith assessment, we propose several methodological considerations for designing quantitative and qualitative assessment. We conclude the chapter with a call to transformative interfaith work.

Over the past decade, religious diversity within U.S. society has changed. The latest report from the Pew Research Center (**2015a**) found a variety of religious traditions are on the rise. For example, since 2007, the U.S. population of Muslims has increased from over 2.5 million to nearly 3.45 million, and growth is projected to reach 3.85 million by 2020. Muslims are projected to make up 2.1% of the U.S. population by 2050 (Pew Research Center, **2015b**). Indigenous religions are also on the ascent as millennials leave Christianity in search of religious traditions that connect to land, ancestors, and

spirituality (Paul, **2018**). However, the biggest change in the nation's religious landscape is related to the group unaffiliated with religion, a group that includes atheists, agnostics, and those who believe in nothing in particular, also known as *nones* (Pew Research Center, **2015a**). Coupled with changing racial demographics, these shifts in religious identity may signal the end of a U.S. society dominated by White Christian hegemony (Jones, **2017**).

U.S. institutions of higher education mirror the population shifts of larger U.S. society. With dramatic increases in the number of students identifying with religions beyond Christianity and even religion itself, religious landscapes on college campuses are changing. In a recent national survey, researchers found Christian students are no longer the religious majority on campus with just under 50% of students on campus now identifying as Christian (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Dahl, Morin, & Associates, **2018**). And while the plurality of students (40%) still identify as both spiritual and religious, an equal percentage of students is disidentifying with religion and choosing to identify as either “spiritual but not religious” (20%) or “neither spiritual nor religious” (20%) (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Morin, & Dahl, **2018**).

Recent scholarship on religion, secularity, spirituality, and interfaith dynamics in higher education has focused on the experiences of a wide variety of religious and secular perspectives. For example, several recent studies found that atheists are marginalized, isolated, and discriminated against on college campuses around the nation (Snipes, **2017**). Muslim students continue to experience Islamophobia on campus ranging from verbal altercations to physical assault (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Bowman, Morin, & Riggers-Piehl, **2017**). Current research on Evangelical students have affirmed the marginal space these students occupy on college campuses around the nation (Mayhew et al., **2017**).

In a recent publication (Snipes & Correia-Harker, **2017**), we called for scholars and practitioners to extend the practice of inclusive assessment to interfaith work on campus to better understand and address the needs and dynamics of students from a range of religious and spiritual identities, practices, and backgrounds. In this chapter, we offer important considerations for designing and executing interfaith assessment on college and university campuses. Before exploring the challenges and offering considerations of inclusive interfaith research and assessment, it is important for us to define what is invoked in the terms inclusive and interfaith assessment. We begin by unpacking notions of inclusivity through the concept of Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE) and then explore our conceptualization of interfaith assessment.

Contextualizing Interfaith Assessment

Our approach to interfaith assessment draws on Culturally Relevant Evaluation (CRE) and responds to Bryant's (**2008**) appeal to student affairs educators to begin earnest consideration of assessment of student creation, engagement, and maintenance of campuses' religious and spiritual climate. The CRE framework emerged from the work of Stafford Hood, who extended the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy to educational assessment and multicultural validity in evaluation. CRE centers culture and rejects the notion that assessment and evaluation are objective, universal, and value-free endeavors (Hood, Hopson, & Kirkhart, **2015**). This rejection forces assessors and researchers to consider who constructed the measurement, their connections to the communities they are evaluating, and to use asset-based rather than deficit models to understand marginalized groups (Hood

et al., **2015**). In the higher education context, Montenegro and Jankowski (**2017**) applied CRE to develop and assess student learning outcome statements by applying multiple assessment approaches and rethinking data analysis.

Understanding Worldview and Interfaith Assessment

To make interfaith assessment an inclusive form of assessment that accounts for a range of religious and secular worldviews, student affairs educators must weave in culturally responsive approaches. In this chapter, we have used the term *worldview* and defined it as a “guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, a non-religious perspective, or some combination of these” (Rockenbach, Mayhew, & Kinarsky, **2014**, p. 5). We use this term because it is succinct, inclusive, and captures the essence of this identity category. We also acknowledge that the term has been criticized as not clearly connoting beliefs and religion. But it is for this precise reason we use the term; by decentering religion, space can be created for other secular and nonreligious identities. Interfaith assessment can both focus on a broader cross-section of the student population to understand trends within the campus community as well as focus on the needs, perspectives, and development of unique worldview communities that may need specialized attention. When doing any type of campus or programmatic assessment, student affairs educators should attend to the different ways students think about religion and meaning-making, as well as consider belief practices, consciously including or excluding atheist students in questions about worldview. As we discuss later in the chapter, those conducting assessment should also attend to how worldviews may influence students’ participation in data collection processes and the ways in which data can be reported. Paying attention to these factors helps researchers and assessment coordinators to respect the worldview identities of all participants, limits conditions that exclude students from participating in assessments, and helps assessors collect more meaningful information from participants.

Considerations for Assessment Design

Framing assessment to meet the unique needs of students who are marginalized based on their religious or secular identities requires understanding who is marginalized within specific contexts. Identifying who is marginalized in terms of worldviews can be somewhat complicated. Worldview identities are based on both cultural communities and belief systems that make their categorization either mainstream or marginalized. National, local, institutional, and programmatic contexts play prominent roles when considering marginalization.

Within the United States, Christian beliefs and customs strongly influence dominant norms (Seifert, **2007**). These national norms interplay with regional influences where certain religious or secular beliefs are noticeably common. Whether it is Evangelical Christians in the Bible Belt, Catholics in New England, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Rocky Mountain region, or secular folks in the Pacific Northwest, different regions and pockets of the country have predominant groupings of religious and secular folks (Norman, **2018**). Additionally, within some regions and at some institutions, discussing Evangelical beliefs with others may be shunned or aggressively suppressed, leaving these students feeling threatened and disengaged from the community (Moran, Lang, & Oliver, **2007**). Simultaneously, atheists may feel more comfortable at institutions where faculty or staff encourage students to leave religion at the door. These contextual considerations shape how

student affairs practitioners focus assessment efforts toward certain religious or secular student populations and influence how researchers and practitioners talk about worldviews and worldview identity. These assumptions are often implicit; therefore, we encourage student affairs practitioners to reflect on these assumptions and make them explicit when designing assessments that explore worldview identity.

Language related to religion, spirituality, and secularism anchor our second consideration. Clear, inclusive labels for all religious and worldview identities have been difficult to identify. Whereas other social identities have salient language that is more often commonly understood (e.g., sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, gender), religious identity is complex because it inherently requires some to answer in terms of identity negation. Whereas most identify with one or more sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, and genders, not everyone identifies with a religion. According to a recent national study on religious and secular worldview, 28% of incoming college students do not hold a religious identity (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Correia, Crandall, & Lo, **2016**). These secular and/or spiritual students may immediately feel marginalized when asked about their religious identities. Terms including *religious*, *spiritual*, and *secular*, *belief systems*, or *meaning making* have been used to allow all students to respond affirmatively to an identity.

Considerations for Quantitative Assessments

In addition to the aforementioned complexities related to language about worldview identities, many students and practitioners consider their worldviews as fluid or multifaceted, a dynamic challenging to measure in quantitative studies. Although an open-ended question about worldview identity is most inclusive, this approach may require significant time to code responses and result in numerous codes, which makes using these data in analytic procedures difficult. On the other hand, requiring students to select one worldview identity makes analytic procedures a bit easier. This approach, however, can marginalize those whose identity is not represented; this is regardless of whether their identities are not provided as an option or whether they are combinations of options. A third approach is to provide worldview identity response options and allow respondents to select all that apply and include a write-in option. This alternative not only can give options for students to more freely express themselves but also can limit cumbersome coding and cleaning work during analysis. It is up to each educator to determine what approach is best for their context and aligns with their own and their participants' values.

If providing response options, it is also important to consider what options are appropriate for the study population. Countless worldviews exist, but recent research on worldview diversity has coalesced around response options for some of the most prominent worldviews in the United States (see **Appendix**). However, researchers and assessment coordinators must consider their context and potential participants to determine optimal response options. For example, if a community has a larger Jewish population with internal differences, it may be prudent to include response options for different sects of Judaism (that is, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Orthodox, additional) instead of one response for Judaism in general. Also, researchers and assessment coordinators should consider the intended use of the data. If stakeholders are interested in the ways different Christian students perceive the campus climate, then it will be important to include different denominations and branches of Christianity as options.

On the back end, researchers and assessors traverse additional challenges as to whether to aggregate or disaggregate data when analyzing data by worldview. Disaggregating worldview categories can provide nuanced and valuable information about specific groups. Sometimes students of particular worldviews may be disengaged with or troubled by the campus community, which disaggregated data can help student affairs educators to recognize. Research shows that students of specific worldviews are influenced differently by programmatic interventions, which leads to varying outcomes related to religious pluralism and worldview engagement (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Morin, Crandall, & Selznick, **2015**). Thus, disaggregating data can accurately capture the perspectives of these specific worldview communities.

At the same time, the number of responses for some worldviews may be too small for statistical analyses. While some researchers discard the cases in the analysis, others aggregate worldviews into a group so that it provides analytic power. Rockenbach, Mayhew, Kinarsky, and Interfaith Youth Core (**2014**) aggregate worldview by four categories: worldview majority, worldview minority, nonreligious/secular, and another worldview. Worldview majority students are those who identify with various forms of Christianity, which has been a numerical majority in the United States. Students who practice formal religions that are not Christianity are considered worldview minority students since they are a numerical minority in the United States. Those who do not identify with any formal religion are categorized as nonreligious/secular. And students who identified with something other than those described or held identities that span multiple categories above (for example, seeker, atheist Jew, or Buddhist Christian) were considered another worldview. Students within these four categories have shown distinct trends in research (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Morin, Dahl, & Associates, **2018**). This approach provides a way of including some worldview groups that are too small to be included in other forms of disaggregated analysis. The down side of this procedure is that nuance is lost between groups within an aggregated category.

Considerations for Qualitative Assessment

When using qualitative methods, assessors and researchers understand that unlike quantitative methods that rely on instruments such as surveys to collect data, qualitative methods rely on the researchers as the instruments of data collection. Because researchers are constitutively involved in the data collection and analysis in qualitative approaches, it is critical that they be aware of their own worldviews and biases, especially when their participants hold worldviews different from their own. Being aware of these biases can help prevent assessors from reproducing demeaning and stereotypical depictions of religious or secular communities.

Religious literacy (one's awareness and knowledge of various religious and secular beliefs and practices) is critical to worldview-inclusive qualitative inquiry. With greater Christian knowledge and deep embeddedness within dominant Christian norms, assessors may unknowingly use Christian vernacular (for example, ecumenical, salvation, God, sin) or frame questions or concepts from a Christian and religious viewpoint (for example, asking about sacred scriptures or important figures from their tradition). Furthermore, assessors should be aware of Western tendencies to understand religion as dogmatic or centered on beliefs; some students from Eastern paradigms may see religion as a way of living, which they do not interpret or understand as distinct from their cultural or familial practices (Edwards, **2018**). When creating protocols for focus groups or interviews or when designing

reflection questions for students to respond to, researchers and assessment coordinators should consider what religious and spiritual identities they hold and the ways students of different worldviews and cultures may interpret the questions or prompts differently.

Religious literacy also plays an important role as assessment coordinators plan their assessment procedures. Knowledge of religious holidays, dietary practices, and customs are all instrumental when designing inclusive assessments. When determining timing of data collection (i.e., interviews or focus groups), assessment coordinators should think about whether times offered conflict with prayer or service times, holidays, or sabbath days that restrict some students from participating. Food incentives are a common practice, so assessment coordinators should carefully consider whether they should provide food as an incentive or what food they should provide. Given that some people fast as part of their tradition and religion, offering food during certain holidays or time periods, such as Ramadan, may be problematic for some participants. Additionally, assessment coordinators need to determine what food would be appropriate. Pepperoni pizza is often an easy option in the United States, however, students from many religious traditions, such as Islam, Judaism, and Jainism, may not eat pork or food that is not kosher or Halal.

Those conducting assessment and research should be prepared to discover worldview communities they did not anticipate as they designed their inquiry and be prepared to adapt procedures to incorporate the unique perspectives these communities offer. For example, a blended worldview identity across multiple religious belief systems may be lost in focus group settings, or some students may feel further marginalized by not seeing a focus group category that represents them. Thus, interviews or individual reflections may be more nimble tools that help one adapt to unknown population sizes for certain worldview identities. Assessment coordinators need to proactively consider how they can avoid marginalizing students who may be the only one or one of a handful of students of that worldview from their assessment efforts. For example, protecting the anonymity of individuals who may be the only one or one of a handful of students of that worldview can be a challenge. Therefore, we urge assessors to build relationships with those potentially marginalized communities and invite those communities to provide input and feedback on how they are represented or included in the data collection process. This is critical for any assessment data that will be made public, because the data can serve to justify or continue the marginalization of these groups. This matter of population size becomes particularly important when sharing or reporting results of assessments.

Reporting Results

When reporting and using results from assessments of students with marginalized worldviews, student affairs educators should not reify stereotypes about specific worldviews and should conscientiously craft narratives about how students of different worldviews progress toward developmental aims. Student affairs educators can sometimes associate ideological conservatism or liberalism with specific worldviews; additionally, some researchers and assessors may not recognize when students' worldview values conflict with those held by research and assessment coordinators and perhaps label those students as not as developmentally advanced as other students. When interpreting and writing up results from assessment projects related to students of distinct worldviews, student affairs educators, researchers, and assessors should take care to check their assumptions about specific worldviews and reflect upon what mindset and knowledge undergirds each interpretation of findings

shared. It is possible to reinforce stereotypes when reporting on marginalized populations. However, identifying and labeling stereotypes one holds and then seeking out alternative explanations that challenge those stereotypes can mitigate implicit bias embedded in many of those stereotypes (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, **2012**). When writing and sharing results, especially concerning marginalized worldviews, student affairs educators should take additional measures to ensure accurate and fruitful assessment reporting. One basic practice includes member checking qualitative and quantitative data results with marginalized groups on campus, making sure that the interpretation the assessor brings to the narrative accurately reflects the viewpoints of individuals within the marginalized communities assessed.

Researchers and assessors should recognize that not all worldviews value the same outcomes, nor do all worldviews value the outcomes traditionally promoted in the United States higher education. For example, like some cultures, particular worldviews emphasize reliance on and deference toward authority. This may limit the degree to which students are willing to explore independence and/or entertain experiences that contradict teachings of authority figures. Thus, some assessment or research may seem to suggest that students of some worldviews are stunted in their development, when in actuality, those students may be navigating tensions between the values of their belief systems and that of their context. Understanding when students might be facing these tensions will help provide more insightful and useful recommendations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored and unpacked notions of inclusivity through culturally relevant evaluation and assessment. We also challenged student affairs practitioners to think critically about the design for assessing interfaith work on campus from a place of equity and inclusion. We hope that readers are inspired to join us in this important work by engaging in interfaith assessment on campus. Movements toward interfaith assessment have begun with over 122 campuses participating in the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). However, we hope more campuses begin the important work of assessing interfaith work and engagement on campus. Now more than ever our society needs the healing and restoration that is inherent to interfaith engagement and cooperation on college campuses.

In closing we leave the readers with a challenge. *Tikkun olam* is a Hebrew phrase that is roughly translated as *repair the world*. We believe that interfaith engagement and cooperation are tools that can help campus educators perform the necessary work of healing religious divides, not only on campuses but in the world. By engaging in the practice of inclusive interfaith assessment student affairs practitioners can contribute to healthy campuses and ultimately transform the world.

Appendix

Worldview Response Categories

Regarding your current worldview, with which of the following descriptors do you most closely identify? (*select all that apply*)

1 = Agnosticism

2 = Atheism

- 3 = Baha'i Faith
- 4 = Buddhism
- 5 = Christianity, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- 6 = Christianity, Protestant
- 7 = Christianity, Orthodox
- 8 = Christianity, Roman Catholic
- 9 = Christianity, Nondenominational
- 10 = Confucianism
- 11 = Daoism
- 12 = Hinduism
- 13 = Islam
- 14 = Jainism
- 15 = Judaism
- 16 = Native American Tradition(s)
- 17 = Nonreligious
- 18 = None
- 19 = Paganism
- 20 = Secular Humanism
- 21 = Sikhism
- 22 = Spiritual
- 23 = Unitarian Universalism
- 24 = Zoroastrianism
- 25 = Not listed/I prefer to self-describe (*please specify*)__
- 26 = I prefer not to answer

These worldview response category items were taken from IFYC's Survey Item Bank. For more information about survey design please visit <https://www.ifyc.org/resources/developing-useful-interfaith-surveys>

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