

## Article

## StateChurch: Bringing Religion to Public Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Religion undeniably impacts life in modern society in numerous ways. In the U.S., discussions about religion in public life often start at the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution as fundamental to the separation of church and state. Public higher education does not necessarily share established associations with any religion, but is not free from religious influence. Although Christian influences are undeniably present on public campuses, educators hesitate to discuss religion and spirituality due in part to a pedestrian understanding of the establishment clause and epistemologies that artificially equate secularism with intellectualism. This paper examines case studies conducted at five public U.S. institutions. Focus groups and interviews highlight what different public campuses are doing to address religious diversity, and how they are succeeding or failing to accommodate the needs of students. Findings indicate that executive leaders' attitudes towards religious diversity on campus are essential for sustained interfaith efforts, but fell short without bottom-up buy-in. Faculty in particular served as key bottom-up leaders for interfaith motivation on campus with students often feeling most comfortable exploring different worldviews within the classroom. This study provides reasonable and responsible pathways toward helping locate religion within public education, and substantiating interfaith ideas as necessary for an informed and responsible global citizenry.



**Citation:** Shaheen, Musbah, Matthew J. Mayhew, and B. Ashley Staples. 2021. StateChurch: Bringing Religion to Public Higher Education. *Religions* 12: 336. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050336>

Academic Editor: Al Fuentes

Received: 19 March 2021

Accepted: 7 May 2021

Published: 11 May 2021

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**Keywords:** interfaith; higher education; public universities

## 1. Introduction

Religion undeniably impacts life in modern society in explicit, implicit, direct, and indirect ways, shaping how people interact, form relationships, and make meaning of the world. In the U.S., discussions about religion in public life often occur with legal constitutional undertones, citing the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as fundamental to the separation of church and state (Gerstle 1997). The First Amendment, at its core, strives to guarantee the right to practice religion without government interference (Austin 2014) by maintaining a delicate balance between free exercise and church and state separation delineated by the establishment clause<sup>1</sup>. The Supreme Court has also weighed in on this balance; in *Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984), the Court emphasized the need to “reconcile the inescapable tension between the objective of preventing unnecessary intrusion of either the church or the state upon the other, and the reality that . . . total separation of the two is not possible” (p. 672). These dynamics of the role that religion plays in public life are at the heart of U.S. democracy.

Public higher education in the U.S. does not share established associations with any particular religion, but is not free from religious influence. In fact, college education shared historical ties to Protestant Christianity, a connection that often led to the exclusion of Catholics and Jews (Thelin 2011). Remnants of this relationship still exist, as scholars have noted the many ways Christian privilege remains on public college campuses (Blumenfeld 2006; Schlosser 2003). Chapels and academic calendars that prioritize Christian holidays are clear examples of how Christianity underscores public higher education, and remains influential in students' lives despite the technical separation.

While it may seem that the foundational Christian ethos combined with an increasingly diverse religious landscape on college campuses would naturally result in interfaith engagement, this does not bear out in practice. Although Christian influences are embedded on public campuses, educators often hesitate to directly discuss religion and spirituality due to a pedestrian understanding of the establishment clause that expects a total elimination of any manifestation of religion from public education, and to an epistemology that artificially equates secularism with intellectualism (Mayhew et al. 2020). Empiricist and rationalist paradigms that emphasize secularism as the preferred framework for delivering public education have distanced intellectualism from religious discourse (Hart 1999; Marsden and Longfield 1992), a movement resulting in a strained relationship between religion and American public higher education that reinforces the assumption that the development of religion and spirituality are not of interest or of value to all students.

Religious identities are not monolithic, nor do they exist siloed from other dimensions of diversity, making interfaith discourse an inherent component of students' interactions and engagement on campus. A look at the relationship between religious identity and political affiliation is particularly telling: the majority of first-year students who identify as agnostic or atheist are politically liberal (Stolzenberg et al. 2019). What might the connection between religion and politics be, and could students truly engage in active citizenship without acknowledging their religious beliefs? In the 2020 presidential elections, religious affiliation seemed to be a key factor in predicting voting outcomes (Newport 2020) suggesting that despite efforts toward secularity, religion remains a fixture of American life. Further, an examination of religious affiliations by race/ethnicity is informative: Native American and Asian students are least likely to identify with a particular religion (59.8% and 60.7% respectively) in contrast to Black students who are most likely to do so (81.9%; Eagan et al. 2016). Given these data, does the exclusion of religion from public education ignore the needs of Black students? To complicate the matter further, Native American students are least likely to identify with a particular religion but "they are among the most likely to consider integrating spirituality in their lives as a very important or essential goal" (Stolzenberg et al. 2019, p. 23). How would the abandonment of spirituality as a core component in students' lives further marginalize these communities?

This begs the question—does the current generation of college students not care about religion? Surveys of first-year students who entered college in 2018 showed a decline of the percent of students who identified with a specific religion and a decrease in student spirituality compared to years passed (See Eagan et al. 2016). At face value, these data suggest that students are coming to college with declining proclivities to engage religion and spirituality. However, a closer look shows more nuanced dynamics between incoming college students and religion. For example, students who identified as Agnostic were more likely to have discussed religion than those who identified as Atheist or non-religious (Stolzenberg et al. 2020). In other words, the identification as Agnostic could be theoretically distinct from the identification as Atheist and non-religious, based on an examination of religious beliefs, not necessarily the abandonment of religion altogether. This mirrors other research on interfaith engagement which showed that students are primed to build relationships across religious differences before coming to college and continue to do so during their first year in college (Rockenbach et al. 2019). Could these data make the case that students are more interested in and less threatened by interfaith engagement than campus administrators may presently realize? Not to mention the diverse population of international students, the majority of whom come from non-Christian-majority countries like China, India, and South Korea, that continue to be present on U.S. college campuses (Institute of International Education 2020). Religion is certainly not going away—despite changing patterns of religious affiliation, the perennial questions motivating religious engagement remain salient for many college students, ensuring that this important facet of identity will remain deeply embedded in the lives of college students.

How should educators at public institutions engage within and across faiths on campus? How might interfaith engagement advance equity considerations related to the

inclusion and belonging of community members who hold minoritized religious identities? This paper attempts to answer these questions by examining case studies conducted at five public institutions located across the United States. Student focus groups, faculty and staff interviews, and institutional documents provide insight on what different public campuses are doing to address religious diversity, and the ways in which they are succeeding or failing to accommodate the needs of their religiously-minoritized students.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To conceptualize this case study, we draw from organizational theories that define mechanisms of institutional change. This analysis uses Kezar's (2012) model of bottom-up/top-down leadership which examines how "bottom-up leaders can and do use specific strategies in order to converge their efforts with top-down leaders" (p. 474). The success of any organizational change effort requires communication of interests and priorities between various stakeholders, and a shift of institutional purposes, frameworks, and logics to reflect the desired cultural change (Kezar 2012, 2013; Kezar and Bernstein-Serra 2020). Efforts towards diversity and social justice in particular require foregrounding the power of institutional leaders in mobilizing the necessary resources (Kezar 2001; Pasque and Carducci 2015) as well as the demonstration of a deep commitment to institutional transformation, rather than a merely cosmetic superficial change (Gonzales et al. 2018).

The empirical evidence about religion on campus demonstrates the presence of support for creating space on all campuses from bottom-up leaders including students (Patel and Meyer 2009), chaplains (Small 2014), student affairs professionals (Stewart et al. 2011), and a variety of religious lay-leaders (Rockenbach et al. 2015—e.g., CRU, Intervarsity, Muslim Student Association, Hillel, Chabad). Kezar's (2012) theory describes how the convergence of these interests is needed for effective organizational change to take hold, which requires examining the leadership dynamics within an institution as key to understanding how a university might institute cultural changes and shifts in practices that truly reflect the needs of its constituencies. How might public institutions that are bound by a constitutional mandate to maintain separation between church and state communicate religious diversity as a reflection of student and community needs along with other efforts related to diversity and equity?

## 3. Literature Review

Discussions of whether and how religion can be expressed by public educational institutions often begin with the First Amendment which protects rights to speech, press, assembly, and religion, free from governmental interference (U.S. Const. amend. I 1791). However, to say that the First Amendment prohibits all expressions of religion on campus is a gross oversimplification of the establishment and free exercise clauses (Hart 1999; Marsden and Longfield 1992). Therefore, we will first provide a brief overview of these two clauses and how they influence the state of religion in public collegiate environments, then we will turn to some of the literature about implementing interfaith and religious diversity initiatives.

### 3.1. The Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses: What Do They Mean?

A thorough review of the establishment and free exercise Clauses of the First Amendment is beyond the scope of this section; therefore we will present these two clauses and their meanings in broad strokes. First, the establishment clause, which is often cited as promulgating the separation of church and state, mandated that the U.S. government may not adopt an official religion, or take legislative action favoring one religion over another (Gey 1994). The establishment clause does not mandate a complete absence of religious expression in public life (Ward 2005). In fact, the second clause of interest, the free exercise clause, interdicts the government from taking actions that suppress peoples' right to practice religion freely, which also implies "special accommodation of religious ideas and actions" in a manner that may appear to "violate the neutrality between religion and

non-religion mandated by the establishment clause” (McConnell 2002, p. 105). Succinctly said by Chief Justice Burger: “the total separation of [church and state] is not possible” (*Lynch v. Donnelly* 1984). The judicial consideration of religious expression within the public education sphere (see McConnell 1985) has contended with achieving an equilibrium between the right to the free exercise of religion and the prohibition on religiously-motivated governmental action.

The Supreme Court’s standards for how and when such equilibrium is established or disrupted has shifted throughout the years. Previously, the Court adopted a separationist perspective concerned with “the excessive entanglement between government and religion” (Ward 2005, p. 1628). The Supreme Court acknowledged that the constitution does not inhibit all forms of connection between religion and government (Peterson 2001). On the contrary, the Court maintained that some connection between the two is not only constitutional but also necessary for the functioning of society (Cohen 1993; Holland 1992). In later opinions, the Court Justices shifted from a separationist standard to a psychological standard, suggesting that pressure from the government is not only direct through laws and policies, but can be less overt, indirectly encroaching on religious freedom (see *Allegheny v. ACLU* 1989) which was used to rule on the display and use of religious symbols in public spaces, and the incorporation of religious practices in public affairs (e.g., prayers recited during public school graduation; see Peterson 2001). This perspective on governmental interference and its impact seems to complicate how violations of the First Amendment may occur in public education, and how educators and administrators can avoid such violations and foster a healthy equilibrium.

### 3.2. Religion in Public Higher Education

Public colleges and universities are properties of the state, which makes actions of a public institution in many cases equivalent to government action. Public institutions are therefore compelled to abide with laws and court rulings regarding religious freedom and the separation of church and state (Combs 2018). Some actions, such as requiring students to attend a religious service, clearly violate the separation laws and would be prohibited. However, the legality of some actions might be harder to discern. For example, are university officials allowed to display religious symbols in their offices? Some might argue that constitutes a form of coercion towards a particular tradition in violation of the establishment clause, while others may argue that not allowing individuals to express their religious identity is a violation of the free exercise clause. It seems that most educators circumvent the complexities of intermingling religion with university life by avoiding the topic altogether (see Nash 2001). The question remains: does the avoidance of religion serve the best interests of the students?

One of the key goals of contemporary higher education is to prepare students to function in an increasingly diverse world where they will encounter people with different identities, including those pertaining to religion. The intentional and positive engagement with one’s religion as well as engagement across faith lines is crucial (Edwards 2018; Larson and Shady 2012; Patel and Meyer 2011). Thankfully, there has been a noticeable movement in higher education circles towards more support for interfaith learning and development (Carter et al. 2020; Patel and Meyer 2009). Researchers have demonstrated the positive outcomes that result when students are given opportunities for engagement across religious and worldview differences, those being social, academic, formal, or informal (e.g., Crandall et al. 2020; Mayhew et al. 2020; Staples et al. 2019). Although progress has been documented across higher education research and practice, very few studies have focused specifically on public education and the unique challenges it might face when engaging in religious diversity work.

## 4. Methodology

Data for this study were drawn from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS<sup>2</sup>) project which studied the connection between various

collegiate experiences and environment with interfaith learning outcomes. The longitudinal survey was administered at 122 colleges and universities with a sample that is nationally representative. IDEALS thus makes it possible to compare experiences across institutional types—public and private, large and small, secular, or religiously-affiliated. In addition to the survey data, IDEALS used rich qualitative case studies at 18 campuses to contextualize the quantitative findings (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017; Stake 2006). The case studies offer additional insight into the climate for worldview<sup>3</sup> diversity on various campuses, and the factors that facilitate or hinder interfaith engagement and worldview diversity work.

To identify the factors that support interfaith learning and development within the collegiate environment, Mayhew and Rockenbach (2021) developed the Interfaith Learning and Development (ILD) model as an “emergent but valid theory-in-practice” providing a new perspective of “thinking about religion and spirituality, students’ approaches to their own religious and spiritual selves, and . . . the practices and developmental mechanisms needed to help students grow in these areas” (p. 2). This model accounts for student pre-college experiences and social identities they bring to college campuses and provides a holistic perspective of the environment as nested spheres of influence contextualized as: behavioral (i.e., social, academic, formal, and informal engagement), disciplinary (i.e., academic major), and relational, both productively (e.g., support of religious and spiritual expression) and unproductively (e.g., discrimination, insensitivity). These student-level contexts are situated within organizational behaviors, values, and cultures, located within a specific national context, all of which frame interactions that occur within the learning environment. The ILD defines four main outcomes of the interfaith learning environment: pluralism orientation, appreciative attitudes, appreciative knowledge, and self-authored worldview commitment. This model serves as a useful theoretical guide when studying the spiritual, religious, and secular worldview campus climates at colleges and universities with distinctive conditions (e.g., public institutions) because it accounts for how students behave, interacting with each other and with faculty, staff, and the surrounding community, and how campus culture shapes all these interactions.

Of the 18 institutions selected for case studies, five were public institutions. This paper presents findings from cross-case analysis that sheds lights on the challenges that these institutions faced, practices they adopted, and lessons they learned that become the basis for recommendations we offer to public institutions interested in implementing and growing in this area of diversity. The goal is to provide themes and insights drawn across the data from the five cases.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The case studies conducted as part of IDEALS took place over three days which gave the research team adequate time to observe and document institutional conditions that influence the climate for worldview diversity on campus (Creswell and Poth 2018). Participant recruitment was facilitated by campus liaisons who identified faculty, staff, and administrators familiar with interfaith efforts at each institution. Campus liaisons also facilitated recruitment of students to participate in the focus groups, helping the research team in attempting to capture a broad range of worldview identities, campus involvement, and interests in interfaith engagement. Data collection occurred through four approaches: hour-long semi-structured interviews with faculty and staff, 90-min focus groups with 4–8 students each, observations of relevant activities, classes, and spaces, and a review of pertinent institutional documents to facilitate additional understanding. Details about the number of participants and institutional characteristics are included in Table 1.

The qualitative analysis was aligned with the quantitative findings by using a priori coding structure that captures important empirical constructs from the survey (Stake 2006). This approach is beneficial for large, team-based, qualitative research because it helps maintain focus on the primary goals of the study (Crabtree and Miller 1999). Teams of 4–5 researchers, one of whom was present on-site during data collection, were responsible for coding the data from each case study. All members of the coding team were



familiarized with the codebook prior to coding several transcripts, after which each team collectively discussed the suitable application of the codes. The remaining transcripts and observation notes were each coded by two researchers to enhance trustworthiness (Patton 2015). Following the completion of initial coding, the research team leader and a research associate examined all coded excerpts to identify shared themes and patterns within each institution's case study which were used to write evaluation reports for each institution. After that, the researchers examined all five institutions as a bounded system (Jones et al. 2014) and identified themes that were shared across the five public institutions, which are presented in the findings section of this paper.

**Table 1.** Sample demographics.

Institution Pseudonym	Geographic Region	Institutional Size	Interviews Conducted	Student Participants
Heartland State	Plains	3000–12,000	11	12
Midwest State	Great Lakes	More than 12,000	10	15
Southeast State	Southeast	More than 12,000	8	11
Southern State	Southeast	More than 12,000	9	12
West State	Far West	More than 12,000	10	10
		Total	48	60

## 5. Limitations

IDEALS case study research presents several limitations worth highlighting. First, the participant pool may have been limited due to the time we chose to visit campus and the duration of our stay. Second, participant recruitment occurred through a single campus liaison which inherently limits the scope of our sampling. Third, the topic of this research study likely appealed to some, not all, students, faculty, and staff which in result may have led to an overrepresentation of those who are inclined toward interfaith engagement or a lack of representation of diverse perspectives. Therefore, findings that relate to student perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors should be interpreted with a consideration of the limitations of the participant pool.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Leadership Attitudes Drive Engagement

Across the five institutions, we noted that participants often referred to university executives like presidents, provosts, and chief diversity officers when discussing the attitudes toward religious diversity across campus and how it might fit into the mission and vision of the institution. For example, at Midwest State, one female staff member perceived “support from the top all the way down”. She continued to describe the recent shift in administration saying, “we have a new president, she is supportive of [interfaith] as part of our diversity, equity, and inclusion commitment on this campus”. At Southeast State, the turnover in senior administration had a detrimental effect on religious diversity efforts on campus. According to a faculty member, the “previous president really oozed diversity and inclusion and was very much on top of it . . . he helped eliminate some of the . . . potential barriers that were there”. However, the new administration left the university in a state of flux, as exemplified by one staff member who said, “our new president is still outlining his focus initiatives and right now they’re so focused on . . . performance metrics that he hasn’t really talked about how diversity fits into that, whether it’s worldview diversity or something else”. It mattered at all five institutions whether and how university figureheads talked about how religious diversity fits into their vision for the institution.

Individual leaders’ statements, attitudes, and priorities were insufficient without action; they needed to translate into structural executive-level changes that reflect diversity priorities, often in the form of interfaith committees, religious diversity commissions, and task forces. Such entities were successful and thrived when they had a specific direction and goal, but struggled when they lacked direction. At Heartland State, an interfaith

subcommittee was established but lacked “any kind of official charge or organizational status”. This committee member continued to lament how “we don’t report to anybody . . . this committee has continued despite the fact that we don’t have any clear charge or mission or budget, or anything. We have no money to do stuff. We have no nothing”. At Midwest State, an interfaith task force played a significant role in mobilizing initiatives pertaining to religion on campus, such as creating a reflection space on campus that students can use for prayer and meditation. However, the momentum of that group fizzled as some of its members left the institution. According to one faculty member who was newly appointed to the taskforce, “all I’ve been doing is talking about things that have been done in the past . . . I don’t really feel like I’ve been actually involved in doing anything except attending the meetings and giving input on things that are brought up”. Leaders at Southern State did, indeed, articulate religious diversity as part of institutional priorities, but fell short at tasking a staff or faculty person to oversee related efforts. As one administrator noted, “I just don’t think it’s really been assigned to anyone, so I don’t know that it’s anyone’s responsibility at this point”.

The data indicated that sometimes the problem was not the lack of attention to diversity in general, but religious diversity in particular. Heartland State, for example, faced a myriad of diversity challenges that required choices about where time, effort, and resources would be devoted, as one administrator noted: “I do think we have some challenges related to race and ethnicity that we need to work on first . . . and should take a priority for us as an institution”. Religious diversity was never assumed to be a part of diversity efforts in general and there seemed to be a need to intentionally name diversity of worldviews as part of many institutional directions towards diversity. At West State, students and staff felt the administration could do more to prioritize religious diversity, and that when interfaith engagement efforts are made, “it seems like interfaith work is a cute add-on to a lot of things . . . but the actual values that translate from being a part of interfaith communities don’t seem to land as well”, according to one staff member. Indeed, across the institutions in our sample, some form of diversity effort was being made, but for the majority, the focus seemed to be on gender and racial diversity, with religion taking a backseat. The Diversity Officer at Midwest State was lauded for her approach because “when she speaks about diversity, in general, she includes religion and worldviews in her statement. It is not just race, gender identities, sexual orientations . . . and I think that that speaks volumes because I think sometimes it’s swept under the rug”.

It is important to note that barriers to religious engagement at the five public institutions were not due solely to institutional support, or lack thereof, but were more “a matter of execution than permission” according to a faculty member at Southeast State. Many campuses expressed a perceived lack of any cohesive approach to interfaith programming. A staff member at Southeast State, for example, felt that there was a misguided belief among some that “we have these offices so the campus climate is going to be good. We have events and that’s wonderful”. However, she went on to say, “the reality is that unless everyone across campus and all the leaders are really buying in and communicating, it can’t be done”. This idea is exemplified by what one administrator at Midwest State shared:

Just because the president says, “We’re going to do interfaith work on campus”, unless you’re going to specifically designate staff members who are actually, that’s part of their job . . . Everybody is barely getting their own work done. Most people are not interested in taking on additional responsibilities along the way.

## 6.2. Classroom Spaces Essential for Worldview Engagement

Across the five institutions, classroom settings were frequently described as places where students could explore religious topics and gain interfaith skills in a safe and structured environment. Classroom engagement took on various forms across the data. Some institutions offered an elective class on world religions which seemed to have a positive impact on students’ appreciation and awareness of other worldviews. One female student at Midwest State described the experience thus:

I took a religion class and that helped teach me a lot. I heard that this holiday is today, and I have no idea what it is. Maybe an Indian holiday or something, so I want to look that up. Or these two religious groups are fighting with each other and I want to look up why this is happening and what is causing that.

Students at Midwest State seemed to benefit from taking classes on religious literacy, and the reported changes were notable. One staff member, reflecting on the positive change she had witnessed when students were in a class about faith, posited that it happened “not only because [students] looked critically at their own [belief] system, but they were able to learn about other faith systems . . . and they hadn’t yet had that opportunity”. At West State, interviewees often agreed that curricular spaces were ideally suited for religious diversity engagement, making classrooms ideal settings for worldview encounters, as exemplified by one faculty member who said, “I think the most successful [engagements] I’ve seen have been from philosophy and other academic departments”. Reaffirming this trend of productive classroom spaces, one faculty member at Heartland State described the ripple effect that appears to happen after students take a World Religions class:

Once the spark occurs in class, [students] tend to want to hear from other students. I think for most of our students they are coming from hometowns where everyone seems to think and believe the same thing. And once they realize that people think differently than them, and so long as they’re in the classroom, they don’t feel threatened by that. They just want to . . . learn more. They just want to talk more in particular. Not just read about what someone else believes but hear it from someone.

The data revealed many ways to incorporate religion and worldview diversity into students’ academic lives. Some institutions adopted a common reading for all first year students focused on religious diversity, which helped provide a concrete framework for incorporating conversations about religion into various areas of the curriculum throughout the academic year. As one staff member at Midwest State affirmed, “making the [common reading] part of assignments . . . students don’t always agree with what they hear . . . they learn about something and then they make their own judgment about it and back up their reasoning”. In other words, students were able to develop the skills needed to critically evaluate ideas they encounter and form their own opinions and perspectives.

The caveat for engaging in religious topics in the classroom is that it not only requires courses to be offered and components of religious diversity integrated into the curriculum, but also requires faculty who are willing and able to facilitate productive dialogue about religion and worldview. For example, at West State, students acknowledged that worldview came up most frequently in the classroom, but clarified that many of their encounters were negative. Several students felt that faculty made assumptions about the religious worldviews of their students; in turn, these assumptions fueled faculty attitudes and behaviors that negatively impacted the classroom climate. Specifically, students described an environment where agreement on matters of religion and politics was presumed, if not expected. As one student described:

I’ve definitely experienced this sense that everyone has a very similar worldview, especially politically, and that ties very closely to lack of religion. So, [professors] say things in kind of like a “wink, wink” [way] and everyone kind of goes, “Ha, ha, yeah right” as if everybody’s on the same page . . . I think that really overlooks, especially conservative viewpoints, or people who do hold more strong religious beliefs, whether that’s based in Christianity or even other really strong faith bases like Islam . . . The professors will say stuff, like they’ll just like throw it out there, just casually, as if everybody’s on that same page. Like, “There is no God”, or “Christianity has, like, ruined the world”.

At Midwest State, where campus adopted a worldview-related common reading, one staff member commented that the common reading might be the students’ “only exposure” to those ideas. The sporadic implementation strategies and the lack of skill- or capacity-



building has meant that as the common reading has changed, conversations shifted away from interfaith topics. At another institution, Heartland State, there were very limited offerings that addressed issues of religious diversity directly or indirectly, as one student expressed, “we need to include more than just one class [that addresses] diversity . . . More professors need to include things . . . we don’t offer a lot of alternatives to talk about other cultures, other beliefs, other diverse people”.

At the core is the tendency of faculty to avoid topics of religion in the classroom, as instructors “tend to probably stay away from religion as controversial. When [faculty] get into more controversial things, they tend to be a little more political. And mostly diversity, especially racial diversity, is a big topic on campus”. Staff and administrators across the interviews commented on how open or comfortable faculty seemed to be with religiously-oriented engagement in the classroom, indicating that even when faculty members have opportunities to discuss religion in their classrooms, “they’re not embracing that conversation . . . or maybe they don’t know how to have that themselves”. A related challenge that emerged was the difficulties faculty and staff had understanding how, why, and to what purpose conversations about religion were important in the context of a public institution. This barrier was expressed by one female staff member, who said:

I think the barriers [to religious diversity work here] are probably the difference of understanding of what can be discussed. Maybe even possibly what our goals are in that area. I’m sure there’s some professors that will openly have discussions. Sometimes the thought that you can’t have discussions unless you’re teaching in a specific area. I think quite honestly some are probably not prepared to have those discussions, meaning some education would be helpful so they probably don’t feel educated enough and others probably evaluating them may say the same thing.

### 6.3. Underestimating Student Capacity for Religious Engagement

During case study visits, we frequently sought to ascertain from faculty, staff, and administrators the extent to which they believe their students are capable of engaging within and across religious worldviews. Illuminating campus leaders’ perceptions when it comes to their students’ capacities for interfaith learning and development can point to opportunities for growth in areas where engagement is limited. At Southern State, for example, it was difficult to discern students’ capacities in large part because few, if any, of the faculty, staff, and administrators we met actively engaged students on matters of religious diversity. Those who did comment on the engagement potential of students expressed skepticism about students’ ability to effectively navigate worldview identities. At Heartland State, one staff member posited that students are “interested [in interfaith conversations] but don’t have the skillset to ask the right questions the right way”.

Another perspective on the lack of student engagement was the overall lack of student interest in this topic. One staff member, for example, characterized the student body at Southern State as, “not even apathetic, but don’t care to talk or don’t care to explore or share”. She went on to say, “some [students] are in-between. I feel like [religious diversity is] not something that is a super hot-button issue on our campus. It is not something that is as . . . reaction receiving as maybe some other issues would be”. In another example, one administrator at Midwest State expressed his perceived lack of student interests in what he called “the big questions” by saying, “I don’t know that they care. I don’t know that they notice that they’re not engaged. I don’t think they’re expecting to get that [here]”. This perception of the lack of student interest was echoed by a faculty member who said, “as far as religion is concerned, I think most students view religion as a fairly personal thing . . . they do their own thing and you do yours”. However, that was not always the case across all participants. One counterexample is from Heartland State where one administrator declared that, “our students are more open and accepting to embracing other thoughts, or differences, than we sometimes give them credit for”. Along the same lines, a staff

member from Southern State described his perception of students' readiness to partake in worldview activities:

There is an opportunity there, and I think it could work, but it would have to be done in a very specific way, because there is still this mentality of a lot of our students that . . . I think that's outside of their comfort zone, so I think it would take a larger initiative coming from a number of areas on campus for students to be open-minded to listening.

Many of the faculty, staff, and administrator interviewees talked in one way or another about the lack of student interest. Students in the focus groups indicated a more nuanced attitude where they recognized the importance of the conversations, but were at a loss of how conversations about religion could be had in campus spaces. In many cases, it seemed that students' interest in religious engagement created opportunities on their own but that these initiatives did not garner much attention at the institution level. For example, one non-traditional<sup>4</sup> student at West State shared how he accidentally learned about a religious dialogue group on campus because he was actively seeking conversations about religion. He described that he had been on campus for over a year and "managed to meet enough people that [he] somehow heard about it". Indeed, conversations with students in focus groups demonstrated that some students do recognize the importance of dialogue across worldviews. One male student at Midwest State articulated that "the purpose of the university is to teach people, so you come here to learn, and you can't learn if you're not willing to change your worldview". When thinking about the barriers to religious engagement, students mostly focused on the difficulties inherent in challenging one-on-one conversations, not necessarily their aversion to topics of worldviews. For example, one student reflected on how "People associate different viewpoints with conflict and that's really stressful. I think people are hesitant to share about their worldviews and their religion because they're afraid that it's gonna cause a fight or it's offensive". Another male student expressed his hesitation to engage with different worldviews, but then concluded, "When I'm forced to do so, I always had a great experience with other people from other worldviews. I don't know why I have that hurdle, but every communication I've had has been successful and eye opening".

Students expressed an awareness of issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, they seemed hesitant or unsure of how to include religious diversity in their dialogue. In another example from Heartland State, one student shared how "not many people just go out and just say what their faith is all the time" and another acknowledged, "there are people who I probably have very, very different views from, and I'm very good friends with. And if we talk about those views it might create a rift in our relationship. So I wouldn't want that to happen". Even at West State, where the environment on campus did not lend itself to inter-religious interactions, students had rich worldview engagement experiences in small friend groups or religious student organizations—where trust had been firmly established. Reflecting this openness, one staff member said:

When we interact with students one-on-one, they're very open to talking about spirituality . . . However, when you get students in a group or as a university as a whole, it becomes kind of locked down . . . I think there is a need and there is a desire that students are opening to figuring it out, but for the most part, it seems when you ask as a whole, people are going to answer to what they think the majority is. But when I've talked to students one-on-one, they've been super open.

Similarly at Southern State, despite the lack of formal religious engagement, some of the students in focus groups believed that the necessary ingredients were present to increase worldview-related efforts, suggesting "on the surface, we have different diverse student organizations . . . so we have the making of [religious dialogue] but we don't dig in".

## 7. Discussion and Implications

For sustainable organizational priorities to take root and become part of institutional culture, executive and grassroots practice should come together. In the context of religious engagement on public campuses, our findings indicated that movement between executives and educators was occurring, suggesting that these public schools indeed could shed light on the organizational issues facing policy and practice pertaining to religious engagement. Critical to any investigation that centers students' learning and development, findings from this study reveal not only that religious learning and development occurs but why it occurs and—of equal importance—how it occurs on public campuses.

Religious diversity efforts on our public campuses began as inclusion practice, actualized from educators who worked directly with students: “Bottom-up” (Kezar 2012) leaders among faculty, staff, and students recognized the need for these efforts and found localized ways to provide them well before top leadership became involved. At religiously-affiliated institutions, worldview diversity issues are likely related to the institution's religious identity and may warrant—or even propel—worldview diversity efforts (Basham and Hughes 2012; Hammond 2019); the same cannot be said for public institutions. Perhaps this bottom-up leadership is more prominent at public institutions because religious diversity is not prioritized or is even summarily disregarded, as Durant (2017) suggests: “Faculty and student affairs professionals cannot be student centered, guiding the whole student, if they do not understand and attend to . . . their spiritual development” (p. 140).

Alternatively, bottom-up leaders who openly embrace worldview engagement may be more committed to meeting students' needs than public institutional priorities concerning church and state separations. In this study, the separation of church and state and the notion that religion does not belong in public life worked against otherwise strong engagement efforts, as some maintained that the public affiliation of the university prohibited active engagement with religious diversity (Durant 2017; Laboe and Nass 2012). To overcome this tension, bottom-up interfaith champions at public institutions located the importance and need for their work in larger diversity efforts. While the messaging from university leadership was often not explicit about the importance of religious diversity, it did convey the importance of diversification and its value as a public good which in turn provided the language, motivation, and leverage needed for bottom-up educators to turn the attention of executives to the importance of interfaith efforts as part of worldview diversification on campus.

Importantly, faculty served as key bottom-up leaders for religious diversity efforts on campus. At all five institutions, we noted quickly that students felt most comfortable exploring their worldviews within the classroom. In particular, faculty in philosophy and religion classes provided more support for helping students explore their curiosity about different worldviews than educators in co-curricular or social settings. Examples of students wrestling with religious ideas and worldview diversity in the classroom may be observed in their use of language like, “I want to look that up”, “I think that in order for a religion to survive, you have to understand that it's okay to let go of some things and it's okay to adapt”, and “there were some very devout Christians, and I'm agnostic . . . they definitely think that changing equals weakness and I just was pointing out it doesn't have to”. Consistently, research has shown that faculty attitudes towards diversity influence students' openness and capacity to engage in difficult dialogue (e.g., Shim and Perez 2018; Ryder et al. 2016), so it may appear unsurprising that students reported being more willing to engage in religious conversations in classrooms where faculty facilitated challenging religious diversity conversations. In these instances, classroom spaces become arenas for developmental conversations to take shape, for assumptions to be questioned, and values to be examined—key practices that may not happen if students are left to their own devices in terms of religious engagement (Jung and Park 2020).

What may be more surprising are student accounts of faculty also serving as barriers to religion-related learning. In our data, we saw how students recognized faculty who “insert their own worldviews into the way that they teach” which led one student at

Midwest State to wonder, “is that the way that I’m supposed to think?”. This question reflects the pedagogical challenges that come with educating about worldview diversity: How do educators discuss their religious narrative in ways that encourage thinking? Should educators share their religious narrative in class at all? Some research suggests that faculty ideologies misaligned with those of students resulted in their lack of interest in course material and overall more negative experiences in the classroom (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006; Woessner 2012; Woessner et al. 2019). Notably, religion is a unique dimension of diversity in that different faiths may proclaim exclusive access to the truth (Jung and Park 2020). How can educators acknowledge the particularities of religion while recognizing its connectedness to other dimensions of inequality? Our findings do not resolve these issues, but cast them as a challenge for faculty who want to teach about interfaith issues and religious diversity: How does responsible sharing of religious narratives invite dialogue across difference? And encourage good thinking? What is clear is that faculty cannot leave these important issues to chance or unexamined: Doing so may compromise students’ intellectual and worldview curiosity and willingness to share in class.

Another key constituency of bottom-up leadership that seemed lost in the milieu of public higher education were the students. Our data showed that many students were actively thinking about their religious identities and engaged with students who are different than themselves; however, the impression of faculty and staff was that students were not “ready” to have productive interactions across differences. Theoretically, learning may be compromised when students are developmentally ready for challenges that are not supported appropriately by educators (see Sanford 1967). In the context of worldview-oriented learning, research continues to show that students are interested in religious topics and aware of the many extracurricular faith and non-faith-based clubs and organizations on campus (Bryant 2006; Mayhew and Rockenbach 2021; Nord 2005; Rockenbach et al. 2015, 2017). The readiness of students—expressed by our findings and documented evidence regarding student participation in religious clubs and organizations—should alarm educators underprepared or resistant toward engaging religion on public campuses. Get ready, religion is once again coming to college!

As part of a readiness strategy for educators, top leaders (e.g., department chairs, faculty development offices) may need to provide some resources toward educating the educators about religious and worldview diversity (Edwards 2017; Larson and Shady 2012). Faculty who were hesitant or who did not have the skills to engage in such conversations compromised diversity efforts—accounts of insensitivity students shared during the focus groups often involved faculty members’ conduct in the classroom. Additionally, our findings showed that many avoid these topics due to the perception that religious conversations may not be appropriate topics at public institutions or to personal unfamiliarity with facilitating religious discussions. These perceptions may be tied to the misunderstanding of the establishment and the free exercise clauses as requiring an elimination of religion from the public sphere (Ward 2005). To disrupt these barriers, teaching centers may want to remind educators about the practical value of engaging worldview diversity such as appreciation of difference and increased citizenship capacities (see Rockenbach et al. 2018) so faculty and staff have a rationale to offer students and families who may be skeptical. Indeed, one faculty member did just that by connecting worldview diversity to the lives of local farmers who “are doing international business...they have globalized before urban centers have globalized and diversified”, illuminating how students are “already part of a changing America”.

Locating the importance of religion on public campuses is also something that may motivate executive university leaders, such as presidents, provosts, and chief diversity officers toward change in their institution. Other diversity-related research has emphasized the need for university leadership—complete with executive priorities and practice—to serve as the mobilization force behind efforts designed to make public education inclusive of all identities (Hoffman and Mitchell 2016; Patton et al. 2019). High-level leadership is

perhaps exemplified by what one staff member shared at one of the institutions in our study about “administrators who are supportive of interfaith as a benefit to our students...the fact that we’ve become an official commission that advises the president on issues of faith at the university is a testament to that”. As an example of what not to do, one disheartened staff member described how the interfaith committee at his institution “has continued despite the fact that we don’t really have any clear charge of mission or budget or anything. We have no money to do stuff. We have no nothing”. Previous research on the work of diversity-related initiatives like committees have demonstrated the central role of goal-setting in mobilizing productive change (Anderson 2020; Leon and Williams 2016). Clearly, any top-down religious diversity initiative should provide clear direction with any initiative designed to reflect a sustained institutional posture toward productive religious engagement.

More than ever, confusion riddles discussions of the mission, purpose, and value of public higher education, especially with regard to religion and its expression on campus. Hackneyed and uninformed understandings of separation between church and state have led educators and the public to question the role religion plays in public education. Should tax-payer dollars be allocated toward institutions that prioritize and value religion as an essential component of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging? Can a public institution require religious literacy courses? How much latitude do educators at public institutions have in sharing their faith in the classroom? Questions like these push not only ideas of public education but education itself.

## 8. Recommendations

First and foremost, institutional leaders must communicate a commitment to religious diversity efforts and initiatives. Consistent support of students’ religious and nonreligious identities is critically important, especially for students from minoritized groups. One avenue for improving the campus climate involves messaging from the president’s office. Official statements underscoring the importance of religious diversity would elevate people’s awareness of religion as an aspect of diversity that is valued at the institution. Investing resources (e.g., space, programming funds, personnel) is another way to communicate that an institution values worldview learning and development.

Committees, commissions, and task forces could be established, but must be engaged as part of a larger strategic planning process that will promote sustained change by identifying the immediate, short-term, and long-term goals. These leadership bodies should find innovative ways to include student voices in their composition, activities, and decision-making. In addition, committees should balance their role as coordinating groups, advisory bodies, and catalysts for programmatic engagement. Strategic planning should also engage with stakeholders including community faith leaders, campus chaplains, student organization advisors, and other constituents committed to diversity. This communication across stakeholders is key for an integrated approach to religious diversity engagement—for students of all religions and no religion—across campus.

Institutions must also capitalize on opportunities in the classroom given the observed potential of curricular opportunities to effectively engage students in meaningful dialogue. While increasing the number of courses around religious topics would be ideal, it is not the only way to include worldview diversity in the curriculum. Embedding worldview topics within existing classes about diversity, equity, and inclusion would help bring religious conversations to more classrooms where all students, both religious and non-religious, could engage in fruitful dialogue around important social issues. Concurrent to curricular innovations, academic leaders should engage in training efforts to help faculty find a place for religious expression and discussion in their classrooms. Clear statements from discipline-specific leaders about how worldview diversity fits with and upholds the academic mission may be critical to realizing curricular integration. Further, providing examples from within the departments, lists of relevant books, chapters, and articles to incorporate into coursework, options for professional development, and incentives to



innovate around religious diversity could sway faculty members into making an effort to institute changes in their class plans. Combining curricular change with continuous professional development opportunities for faculty members may facilitate classroom environments that are conducive to interactions and dialogue across worldviews.

Institutions must invest in the creation of physical spaces where formal and informal worldview interactions can occur between students of all religious and nonreligious identities. Intentional spaces for religious expression not only offer a physical location where students can gather; their mere presence also improves perceptions of a welcoming climate (Rockenbach et al. 2015). The cultivation of visible, accessible, and dynamic religious spaces would offer fertile ground for informal engagement and provocative encounters to occur, both of which are important precursors to improving the climate for religious diversity. Concurrently, institutions must work on developing and cultivating interfaith leaders across the institution. Incentivizing more participation in interfaith engagement—whether among student groups or campus offices—is one way to broaden the scope of religious diversity work and improve the climate for worldview diversity on campus. Indeed, institutions would do well to identify and empower those individuals who already have an interest or stake in matters of worldview diversity on campus to be interfaith champions among their faculty, staff, and administration. These leaders will be well-positioned to incorporate religious and interfaith programming into departments or functional areas, and could contribute to ascertaining the worldview-related needs of students; equipping fellow faculty, staff, and administrators to better support students' worldview development; and cultivating a campus-wide understanding of worldview engagement.

Finally, faculty and student affairs professionals must work together to coordinate formal and informal interfaith efforts. For example, requiring a common reading focused on religion and worldview could equip students with a shared language to prepare them for future encounters with worldview differences. Additionally, a common reading would leverage curricular spaces and offer a bridge between classroom discussions and co-curricular orientation or first-year experiences. Perhaps most importantly, a worldview-oriented common reading may help normalize constructive engagement with worldview diversity.

## 9. Conclusions

Hopefully, this study provided reasonable and responsible pathways toward helping locate religion—and interfaith epistemologies and expressions—within the values and purpose of public higher education. Findings indicate that strong and effective administrative leadership may be critical in essentializing interfaith practices within public institutions, though currently much of the leadership in this area has emerged from faculty and students. Taking small, empirically-based steps like the ones discussed as recommendations for practice may not only address lingering questions about the role of religion in public education but substantiate interfaith ideas as part of the necessary knowledge-base for an informed and responsible global citizenry.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.S., M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Data curation, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Formal analysis, M.S., M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Funding acquisition, M.J.M.; Investigation, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Methodology, M.S., M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Project administration, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Resources, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Software, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Supervision, M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Validation, M.J.M.; Visualization, M.J.M.; Writing—original draft, M.S., M.J.M. and B.A.S.; Writing—review & editing, M.S., M.J.M. and B.A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) research is made possible by funders including The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, and the Julian Grace Foundation.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of The Ohio State University (Protocol 2017B0090, approved 25 September 2017).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.



**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the second author of this study. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion [the establishment clause], or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [the free exercise clause]; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.
- <sup>2</sup> The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is a national study that is led by co-principal investigators Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach (North Carolina State University) and Dr. Matthew Mayhew (The Ohio State University) in partnership with the Chicago-based non-profit, Interfaith Youth Core.
- <sup>3</sup> In this paper, we use the term worldview to refer to “a guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, nonreligious perspective, or some combination of these” (Mayhew et al. 2016, p. 2). Although the expressions ‘interfaith’, ‘religious diversity’, and ‘worldview differences’ are not identical, we use them synonymously in this work to refer to interactions between, among, and across worldviews.
- <sup>4</sup> In the U.S., the term “traditional” college student applies to students between the ages of 18–24. A “non-traditional” in this context refers to an older student who did not enroll in higher education straight out of high school and chose to work or serve in the military before pursuing a postsecondary degree.

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