

**Interfaith Consultant's Report**  
**Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs**  
**November, 2017**

Guided by the tenets of Inclusive VT, Virginia Tech seeks to expand efforts to celebrate religious diversity and generate conversation and understanding within and between faith traditions, and with students with no religious affiliation.

As such, Vice President for Student Affairs Patty Perillo requested that I assess the potential for interfaith dialogue at Virginia Tech, as well as provide recommendations for “strengthening meaningful engagement between diverse religious perspectives.”

Over the course of the spring and summer semesters, 2017, I interviewed more than thirty individuals from the Virginia Tech community. Approximately half of these interviews were with members of the Virginia Tech Interfaith Council (VTIC), ten were with directors of student affairs departments, and five were with campus leaders with responsibility for inclusion and/or with a vested interest in interfaith work on campus. Additionally, I met once with the Division of Student Affairs executive team, twice with the Virginia Tech Interfaith Council, three times with Vice President Perillo and Dean of Students Brown, and once with Vice Provost for Inclusion and Diversity, Menah Pratt-Clarke.

In this report, you will find my assessment of the current conditions for interfaith engagement, insight into why Virginia Tech (and other universities) are wise to promote interfaith engagement, as well as my overall observations and recommendations for taking steps toward strengthening it.

### **The National Context for Interfaith Engagement**

As the nation's population continues to grow more racially and ethnically diverse, colleges and universities are challenged to create campus cultures that are simultaneously accessible to, and inclusive of, these backgrounds. Similarly, American religious diversity continues to evolve and become more complex, which is highlighted in a 2015 Pew Research Center Report, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. Given this rapidly expanding diversity, our democracy will be challenged if we fail to pursue interfaith work. Eboo Patel, Founder and President of Interfaith Youth Corp, puts it this way: “The different ways that people express religious and secular identities are especially important in a democracy, where people are free to bring their personal convictions into public life” (p. 7).

While many higher education leaders have responded vigorously to ethnic and racial demographic shifts, inclusive practices for religious diversity have been slower to materialize on college and university campuses, especially in the public sector. In response, a growing cadre of public universities are emerging as frontrunners in the movement to develop formal programs that support students from diverse religious backgrounds, as well as create dialogue between them. Examples of these entities include: Penn State's

Pasquerilla Spiritual Center, the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs Center for Religious Diversity and Public Life, and Oregon State's Center for Spiritual Life.

Harnessing the grand potential for learning inherent in diverse environments begins with demonstrating that a campus welcomes and embraces students into a campus culture. Once diverse communities are assembled, however, interaction between diverse backgrounds must be facilitated in order for friendships and learning to occur. The implications for doing this well are much grander and will have a profound impact on the world we find in the decades ahead. As Tricia Seifert writes, "In order to live up to its duty to serve the nation, the U.S. higher education community (boards of trustees, senior administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty) must rise to the task of educating students holistically so they may unite heart with head to solve the intransigent problems that plague our world" (p. 76).

### **The Benefits of Interfaith Engagement**

I'm often asked why a community would be compelled to develop an intentional interfaith engagement plan. While the reasons are numerous, I offer you these important outcomes for colleges and universities:

- ***It will offer radical hospitality for all students who wish to make connections to spirituality, religion, faith, and life purpose***

The role of interfaith work is both symbolic and practical. Symbolically, it says, "We value and support every part of what it means to be human..." Practically, it continues, "... and we don't expect you to figure out this meaning all by yourself." An Interfaith perspective offers a 'big tent' of radical hospitality where students explore ways to make and maintain meaning in life.

- ***It will facilitate critical reflection***

Universities have become excellent at asking students to reflect on their *learning*. How are we also asking them to reflect upon their *living*? Without exploring spirituality, religion, faith, and life purpose, it is impossible to reflect upon a whole life. This is mainly true because "spiritual life" is not what happens before, after, or beyond the rest of life, but rather is a way meaning can be made while living it.

- ***It will encourage transformative conversation across boundaries***

Much common good is attainable when diverse religious entities sustain dialogue and form natural partnerships around what matters most. Because religious identity intersects with race, culture, sexual orientation, and other identities, an Interfaith structure helps form a larger, common tent of meeting where these relationships can be fostered for the common good.

- ***It will abate fear as a motivating paradigm for spiritual questions***

Universities often shy away from dialogue about spirituality, religion, faith, and life purpose on the basis of several common fears:

- Hesitation about broaching such personal topics
- Uncertainty about institutional support
- Perception that dialogue may be perceived as coercion to a particular world view

An Interfaith model helps dispel these fears by offering:

- Intentional, careful, optional space for curiosity and reflection related to personal topics and meaning making where spirituality, religion, faith, and life purpose are pieces necessary for becoming more whole.
- A trustworthy mechanism for institutional support and partnership because all types of inter-faith and intra-faith exploration regarding spirituality, religion, faith, and life purpose are encouraged.
- An entity (un-tethered to any particular faith tradition) that is responsible for helping to uncover questions that encourage students to find their own particular answers.

- ***It will expand crisis care to spiritual care regardless of religious tradition***

If crisis is any time in which an important decision must be made, perhaps the most common denominator for college students is the experience of multiple crises. Every crisis, positive or negative, becomes a possibility for learning. Crises are not all by themselves opportunities for learning, but learning rarely occurs independent of crisis.

Rainer Maria Rilke says crises bring about spiritual questions, with or without the benefit of God-talk, such as, “Does my life have meaning and purpose? Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs? Whom and what shall I serve? Whom and what can I trust? How can I rise above my fears? How do I deal with suffering: my own, that of my family and friends, and that of the larger world? How can I maintain hope? What does any of this mean in the face of the fact that I’m going to die?” Rilke admonishes these questions must be ‘lived’ in order that we might “gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.”

### **Students at Virginia Tech and their Experiences**

In the past few years, Virginia Tech has participated in several national studies that provide relevant insight for Virginia Tech. In the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Virginia Tech students reported lower scores (compared to peer institutions) when asked about encounters with diverse perspectives in course discussions or assignments, and the gap grew between the freshman and senior years (statistically significant). A particularly telling NSSE finding was that only 55 percent of students responded affirmatively (very much) to the question that Virginia Tech helped strengthen

“understanding of people of other backgrounds (racial, ethnic, political, religious, national, etc.)” In another national study conducted by the Interfaith Youth Corp, Virginia Tech students reported significant differences to comparison groups in experiences “transforming to worldview” and encountering “curricular religious engagement.” This same report found that Virginia Tech students identified themselves as:

Both religious and spiritual	41%
Spiritual, but not religious	27%
Religious, but not spiritual	8%
Neither spiritual or religious	24%

Notable in this combination of findings is that 76% of Virginia Tech students self-select identities that include spiritual, religious, or both, and yet, a far smaller percentage finds support, encouragement, or curricular programming around religious and/or spiritual diversity.

### **Consultant Observations**

At Virginia Tech:

1. Spaces exist that allow students who claim various religious identities to interact with respect, challenge, appreciation, dissent, and partnership. These environments may usually be classified as grass roots initiatives and are often sporadic and inconsistent in their delivery and coordination. Some examples include the Ask Big Questions initiative, and the “Misconceptions: Religion” event hosted by the Free Thinkers.
2. Religious diversity is currently more intrafaith (within the Christian tradition) than interfaith (among diverse faith traditions). For example, the Virginia Tech Interfaith Council is pre-dominately intra-faith, and a “religious and spiritual life” search on the Virginia Tech website reveals a majority of Christian organizations.
3. Advocacy for oppressed religious groups has been consistent and firm (some examples include outspoken support for the Muslim community in the wake of hate graffiti directed at Muslim students, and support for Jewish students after hate paraphernalia was dispersed on Jewish Student Center property). However, intimate relationships or increased understanding across religious lines is sporadic and rare.
4. Service, one of the most important bonding agents for interfaith work, is normative and is an asset to interfaith work that could be easily leveraged.

## Consultant Recommendations

1. My overarching recommendation for Virginia Tech is to move toward a religiously diverse democracy, a concept explored in depth by Eboo Patel (*Interfaith Leadership: A Primer, 2016*). This will require a transition from cursory interaction between students toward a more positive and energetic engagement of religious diversity.

### The Interfaith Triangle

In order for a religiously diverse democracy to occur, Virginia Tech must increase the frequency and intensity of opportunities for interaction around an *Interfaith triangle* (The sides of this triangle represent **attitudes, knowledge, relationships** encompassing the religious diversity on campus). It's not important where one begins on the triangle, only that there is engagement at any point, and then movement that becomes a continuous cycle of learning and discovery.

Guiding students toward an appreciative orientation of other religious traditions is a process that actively seeks the beautiful, the admirable, and the life giving aspects of learning rather than the deficits, the problems, and too often, ugliness that arises from religious differences. This appreciative orientation does not take its knowledge about other religions primarily from the evening news or from social media, but instead is attuned to the inspiring dimensions of other religious traditions through increased exposure to attitudes, knowledge and relationships.

2. A second but critical recommendation is to appoint an institutional leader with excellent stature, training, and wisdom to serve as a champion for interfaith engagement. As also emphasized by Patel (2016), this individual will:

- "...create the spaces, organize the social processes and craft the conversations so that students who orient around religion differently can have a common life together" (Patel, 2016, p.11).
- organize interfaith environments where students "express themselves with the hope of being intelligible and even convincing, but with significant energy to the health of the whole (Patel, 2016, p. 10).
- facilitate a quest for learning to live together within different religious traditions, not only in peace but in mutual trust and loyalty (arriving at a point where students can appreciate others' values without losing allegiance to their own).
- champion development and evolution in students with respect to religious diversity and pluralism.
- help leaders develop their theology/ideology for interfaith work (the conviction that work to this end is not in opposition to, but rather, a necessary expression of one's own religious identity).

3. A third recommendation is to re-conceptualize the Virginia Tech Interfaith Council as a model for interfaith engagement. To do so, I suggest the following:

- The VTIC must include all faith traditions, especially those in numerical minority in the United States. Robust pursuit of diverse representation is critical.
- The VTIC should become a representative council under a larger interfaith umbrella. Individual members of the VTIC may opt in for broad-scope interfaith triangle work (increasing frequency and intensity of attitudes, knowledge and relationships) where it is natural and possible.
- The VTIC should meet in a neutral space that is not specific to any particular religious tradition.
- The VTIC should evaluate 'member' requirements and adjust those that will encourage broader participation (for example, amending frequency and time of programming, especially where these may limit or favor participation from any group).
- The VTIC should adjust programming to include discussions/small group interactions that model a religiously diverse democracy, "where people who disagree on some fundamental things do so without violence and in a manner where they are still able to work together on other fundamental things (Patel, 2016, p. 11).
- The VTIC should include small group dialogue using a text that encourages Interfaith mindset and development (Perillo/Shushok chapter in *Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs, Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, Eboo Patel, resources from IFYC).
- Consult with IFYC for future programming and development.

4. The final recommendation is for the Division of Student Affairs, in continued development of an interfaith landscape and in preparation for an interfaith leader, to elevate the level of campus-wide discourse around interfaith engagement. This could be accomplished by:

- Hosting diverse reading groups (faculty, staff and students) around books/articles that focus on interfaith issues and dialogue.
- Holding speaker events and facilitated panel discussions around interfaith topics.
- Using digital media and story telling to highlight the diversity of religious perspectives on campus.
- Selecting a common book that emphasizes the importance of interfaith learning.
- Working with IFYC to develop a programmatic strategic plan for enhancing interfaith conversation on campus.
- Creating an interfaith web portal that emphasizes resources on campus.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My time on campus was encouraging on a variety of fronts. While most constituents expressed a need to become better educated about interfaith issues and dialogue, there was enormous interest in doing so. Without exception, people conveyed enthusiasm for a Virginia Tech culture that embraced and celebrated religious diversity, but also nurtured in students empathy for those who make-meaning in varying ways. Virginia Tech, therefore, is positioned to be a national leader in the area of interfaith inclusion.

Thank you for the honor of working with you on this project.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Shushok, M.Div.