

Why Support Religious Identities and Religious Diversity?

By Lori Kepner

Our country has valued religious diversity since our founding, and it thrives best when we promote respect for the religious identities and experiences of diverse faith communities. Authentic religious diversity is particularly beneficial on university and college campuses, which serve as training grounds for civic engagement. Universities and colleges are well served when they have religious student organizations that enable students to experience deep connection and belonging over shared identity, beliefs and values. An important part of supporting religious identities and communities involves allowing the groups to select leaders who represent their beliefs with integrity. Disallowing this simple principle of association can be read as a demand for conformity to dominant cultural views (which means different views and identities can face disfavor in different parts of the country). Encouraging structures that allow for pluralism is a better long-term strategy.

As officially registered groups, student organizations also remain members of their colleges' larger campus communities. Colleges can encourage students—who are finding roots for their own identities in distinct communities—to individually and corporately engage with respect towards others whose views and cultural values differ from their own. Promoting such respect and dialogue will lead to more compassion and understanding, while retaining difference. From a policy perspective, we therefore should encourage political and legal structures that enable differences to co-exist, without generating a power-struggle over who defines which views are or are not acceptable. Professor John Inazu proposes a way forward called “Confident Pluralism.”¹

Religious beliefs are both deeply personal and also highly communal in how they are experienced and lived out. They involve more than intellect and are linked to personal identity in nuanced and intricate ways. That is why adherents must be able to choose fellow adherents to lead their groups. A university's commitment to being a diverse and pluralistic community must include authentic religious diversity. As an illustration, one might ask which metaphor better represents religious diversity: 1) **a melting pot**, where religious differences are ignored and minimized (e.g., a Muslim group forbidden from requiring its leaders to be Muslim and instead expected to blend into the dominant cultural ethos) or 2)

Healthy religious diversity on campus means letting campus religious groups choose leaders who authentically reflect their religious tradition.

¹ Inazu, John D., *Confident Pluralism*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

a mosaic, where religious identities are respected and affirmed (e.g., an Orthodox Jewish group with Orthodox Jewish leaders and a clear religious identity that also belongs to a larger diverse campus community). University policies should be designed to enable—rather than undercut—the better option.

A university may require groups to have open participation by any student, however, without hindering this diversity, because open participation allows all interested students to explore any religious group, knowing that each group will represent an authentic expression of that particular faith.

The American public supports this kind of authentic and robust pluralism. One recent study showed a high value in allowing people to choose and practice their religion of choice (even stronger among young people).² In fact, the 2022 version of the same study specifically found “widespread agreement that a religious student group should not be kicked off campus for requiring its leadership to be members in good standing of its faith community.”³ In addition, in another study, undergraduate students identified one of the strengths they valued as the “ability to work cooperatively with diverse people” (88%).⁴

It also improves student outcomes when students find belonging and relational connections during their time in college.⁵ College is not just about academics. Involvement in student clubs can be particularly helpful,⁶ with religious engagement

A sampling of groups that have supported language protecting religious student groups:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Islam and Religious Freedom Action Team, RFI
Coalition for Jewish Values
Asian American Christian Fellowship
The Impact Movement
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
Reformed University Fellowship
Jewish Coalition for Religious Liberty
Cru
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship
Seventh-day Adventist Church-North American Division
Coptic Medical Association of North America
Illinois Muslim Civic Coalition
Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS)

² Religious Freedom Index, 2024, Sixth Edition, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, January 2025 (giving an index score of 86 to religious pluralism).

³ Religious Freedom Index, 2022, Fourth Edition, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, December 2022, at 34 (finding 73% support in the university setting).

⁴ HERI study; see also Samuel J. Abrams, *Religious Diversity Can Reform Our Campuses*, Sapir Journal, vol.15, Autumn 2024, at 9.

⁵ Glazier, Rebecca A., “How to Solve the Student-Disengagement Crisis,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2022 (noting that “[d]ecades of research has shown that the best way to ensure that students are successful in college is to help them build relationships—with professors, with mentors, and with peers”).

⁶ Foubert, John D.; Grainger, Lauren U., “Effects of Involvement in Clubs and Organizations on the Psychosocial Development of First Year and Senior College Students,” *NASPA Journal*, 2006, Vol. 43, no. 1 (finding such involvement correlates with areas of psychosocial development).

specifically associated with improved mental health.⁷

Preventing religious groups from expecting their leaders to identify with, teach and live out their unique faith traditions undermines the creation of diverse communities our country needs. Students may feel pressured to refrain from discussing or challenging anyone's views or saying anything that might offend others. That framing, instead of enabling diversity, undercuts it. It therefore prevents the strength of America that is rooted in its diversity.

In contrast, the First Amendment provides a framework that provides a clear path forward. It is not without tension, but faithfully applying the principle of pluralism in pursuit of religious diversity requires promoting respect, encouraging dialogue, and rejecting practices that marginalize particular religious groups. This is a call that all sides of the political spectrum must be challenged to follow. We must watch out for the ways the principle is commonly watered down as power shifts in the political winds, turning it into an empty promise of "We will defend freedom of expression and religious exercise *except* when we disagree with it." When that emaciated version plays out, it means that whichever "we" temporarily has the power gets to define what is acceptable, often silencing those who disagree and eroding First Amendment protections.

The question then is: are we going to perpetuate inconsistency, or pursue true pluralism and religious diversity as part of the solution?

⁷ See, e.g., Ghodasara, Sweta L. MD; Davidson, Mario A. PhD; Reich, Michael S. MD; Savoie, Corliss V. MD; Rodgers, Scott M. MD. Assessing Student Mental Health at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. *Academic Medicine* 86(1):p 116-121, January 2011. | DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0b013e3181ffb056 (concluding that "students whose religion was 'very important' in their lives had a lower rate of depression compared with those who placed less importance on religion.")