UNFOLDING:

UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE

ISSUE 3
FEBRUARY 2026

ASSOCIATION FOR CHAPLAINCY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UNFOLDING:
UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE

ISSUE 3
FEBRUARY 2026

Welcome to the third issue of **Unfolding: University Chaplaincy in Practice**. This journal exists to draw upon the depth and breadth of wisdom within ACSLHE's diverse membership and to offer practical support to those serving in the field of chaplaincy. With this issue, we wanted to explore, *"The Best (& Worst) Practices in Higher Education Spiritual Care."* We landed on this theme after hearing from seasoned professionals that we needed a repository for hard-earned wisdom. Similarly, newer colleagues were asking for instructions, frustrated by a lack of resources. Our goal was to gather your insights—through articles, case studies, reflective essays, and more—on how the work moves from idea to implementation. In chaplaincy, as in life, failure is an excellent and frequent provider of wisdom. And because chaplains are uniquely skilled at truth-telling, we also invited honest reflection on missteps, challenges, and lessons learned along the way.

One of the profound challenges of being a chaplain is that it is hard to describe what we do and why it is valuable. Part of the reason for this difficulty is that we do so much; we care for a wide variety of communities and diverse members, and we work across varied frameworks and perspectives. Much like chaplaincy itself, this issue contains a little bit of everything. The articles included in this issue reflect that breadth—from interfaith engagement to retreat design, to the prophetic and mystical dimensions of care. This issue is a snapshot of the complexity and richness of our profession.

We begin with two articles by Núñez and Gillespie:

Núñez explores the Open Encounter framework and its role in shaping interfaith engagement at a secular university staffed by an interfaith team. The article highlights three signature programs—the Interfaith Council, the Affiliates Network, and the Flagship Seminar—and evaluates outcomes using belonging-centered metrics supported by survey data from the 2024–2025 academic year.

Gillespie offers a comprehensive literature review synthesizing current empirical research on spirituality and religion in higher education. The article defines key terms, outlines the benefits and challenges students experience, examines how spirituality and religion are conceptualized

and assessed on campus, and concludes with practical recommendations for institutional policy and practice.

Next, we present three case studies by Loomis, Gill Morris, and Peek et al:

Loomis reflects on the Pause Retreat, a new initiative at Southern Methodist University designed to address student stress, burnout, and overcommitment through a 24-hour off-campus experience centered on rest and wellness. Although the retreat drew fewer participants than anticipated, post-retreat surveys revealed meaningful growth in students' understanding of rest and connection. This case study highlights the ongoing tension between student busyness and wellbeing efforts, offering valuable insights for future programming.

Gill Morris's case study introduces the use of an assessment tool as a best practice. The Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Campus Climate Index (INSPIRES Index) is a free tool designed to assess a campus's commitment to supporting students of diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities. This case study explores how chaplains can meaningfully engage this resource.

Peek and Adarkwa describe how two chaplains responded to rising anxiety and uncertainty among students by developing a discernment workshop. The case study outlines the workshop's structure, key takeaways, and participant reflections.

Following the case studies, a reflective essay by Banerjee explores the tension between rationalism and mysticism in spiritual care, particularly in light of the Enlightenment's legacy. Drawing on Hindu traditions, evolutionary cosmology, and personal experience, the essay invites a reclamation of intuitive, embodied, and mystical ways of knowing. It envisions a holistic model of care that honors both science and mystery as essential to human flourishing.

Finally, the issue concludes with two book reviews of texts that promise to help chaplains deepen their interfaith engagement: "*With the Best of Intentions*" by Chris Ray Alexander and "*Theology Without Walls*" by Elizabeth Candido.

We hope this rich collection offers insight, inspiration, and companionship in your work.

Sincerely,

Preeta Banerjee & Elizabeth Hakken Candido
Co-Editors-in-Chief

Elizabeth Hakken Candido is an ordained Presbyterian (USA) Pastor who has spent her career working in interfaith and multi-faith landscapes. She serves as College Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, MI. An essayist and fiction writer, Liz's work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sojourners, Presbyterian Outlook, and Psychology Today.

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D. serves in Babson College's Office of Belonging and Inclusion as Associate Director for Spiritual Life. She draws on over 25 years of experience as a business school professor, corporate executive, life coach and higher education chaplain to bring together spirituality, community, innovation and entrepreneurship. Her practice is rooted in bhakti, gyan, raj and karma yoga.

Open Encounter as a Design for Interfaith Engagement at Butler University

Aziel Nuñez
Director of The Compass Center
Butler University

Abstract: *This article introduces Open Encounter, a framework for interfaith engagement that joins fidelity to one's own tradition with structures that protect the agency of all participants. The framework emerged through work of The Compass Center at Butler University, a secular institution with an interfaith staff, and it offers a clear approach for supporting spiritual care, student dialogue, and campus education in a plural setting. Three programs illustrate the framework in practice, including the student Interfaith Council, the Affiliates Network that provides tradition-specific care, and the Series on Religion and Society that brings academic inquiry into conversation with lived experience. Together these settings show how shared norms, first person testimony, and concrete hospitality can shape a community of belonging across difference. Assessment in this context remains light and student centered, with particular attention given to being seen, belonging, identity reflection, purpose, and wellbeing. Survey evidence from the academic year 2024 to 2025 indicates positive movement on these measures. The article situates this work within scholarship on interfaith leadership and research on belonging and persistence, offering colleagues a design that can be adapted to diverse campus contexts.*

Keywords: *keywords, separated, by, commas, and, in, italics*

Introduction: The Design Challenge

A visiting pastor paused at the threshold where a Muslim and Jewish Life Resource Guide sat beside meditation sign-ups and several campus ministry flyers. "How," he asked gently, "do you, as a Christian, witness to Christ while actively supporting other faiths?" That question, posed early in my tenure as Director, clarified one dimension of the design challenge that frames our work.

A second moment came only weeks later, when students returned to campus. During Welcome Week I gathered all student leaders (the presidents and vice presidents of our eleven affiliated ministries) for a celebration dinner before they hosted a tabling event for first-year students. After introducing myself, I asked how the Compass Center could support them in the year ahead. Several named a shared fear: with theological differences, would deeper interfaith engagement compromise their ability to lead from within their own traditions? Their honesty revealed the same tension I had heard from the visiting pastor, now voiced from inside the community I was charged to support.

For some, the term interfaith can raise questions about faithfulness or proselytization. At the Compass Center, interfaith names cooperation across traditions, and the same principles guide

collaboration among Christian communities. The term does not imply conversion or dilution. The design question is how a university center can support religious life in ways that honor conscience, protect agency, and build belonging.

Open Encounter is our response: a commitment to see shared humanity across difference, to learn about those differences, and to build respect without pressure to agree or assimilate. The aim is a campus where interfaith work feels accessible and meaningful, an invitation rather than an obligation. It embodies a pluralism that welcomes difference without demanding sameness. Consequently, Open Encounter serves as the framework for transformational learning in the sphere of spiritual life. It gives shape to interfaith engagement by aligning programs with student wellbeing and learning, protecting agency, and welcoming particularity without dilution. As Director of The Compass Center, I steward that aim by building structures and habits that make the work concrete and clear, possible in daily practice, and portable beyond our campus.

Open Encounter Framework

A clear framework for religious life in a plural campus community is imperative because diversity alone does not produce belonging or an open community. Those outcomes require structure, shared language, and daily habits, both institutional and personal, that make welcome visible and real. At Butler University, the Department of Culture and Inclusion fosters belonging across many social and cultural lines, including ethnicity. The Compass Center focuses parallel work in the sphere of spirituality and religion, helping ensure that religious and worldview diversity are supported with equal clarity and care.

Within our walls the challenge appears with religious specificity. Eleven interfaith organizations including Athletes in Action, Black Christian Fellowship, Butler Catholic Community, Butler Hillel, Butler Meditation, Butler Muslim Student Association, CRU, Grace Unlimited, LCMSU, Orthodox Christian Fellowship, and Young Life share a single home. Left to preference and the natural drift of a busy calendar, strong communities can unintentionally become silos that fragment campus life and invite subtle forms of competition. In those first weeks of the semester, I watched well-intentioned groups sit at separate tables, greet their own members warmly, and hesitate before engaging others. Nothing was hostile, yet the gaps were real. Open Encounter answers that risk by giving all participants a common way to meet one another, a shared set of rules for interaction, and a vocabulary that protects agency while allowing thick and recognizable particularity to speak.

Open Encounter rests on three design rules that work together. These rules are the minimum condition for encounters that build belonging without blurring difference. **First,** protect agency through noncoercive structures and clear consent. **Second,** center first-person testimony with tradition-forward teaching so people speak from what they practice rather than argue in the abstract. **Third,** pair accessibility with integrity through concrete hospitality, treating time, food, space, and communication as places where respect becomes tangible. **Together,** these rules cultivate responsible freedom and make curiosity and empathy ordinary.

Although the framework is conceptual, The Compass Center makes it real through program design. We translate these rules into practice across a family of programs that share a single

purpose and differ in emphasis. Thus, the Affiliates network foreground spiritual care by placing tradition specific leadership in relationship with students and with one another. The Interfaith Council foregrounds engagement by forming students to listen, speak from experience, and work across difference. The Series on Religion and Society foregrounds education by raising campus literacy through accessible scholarship and structured experience. Taken together, these examples show that Open Encounter is broad enough to sustain varied programming while keeping agency central and belonging in view. The scenes that follow trace these three expressions in turn.

Scene 1: Interfaith Council

Each year the Council brings together a new cohort. This year it included five Muslim students, one Jewish student, four Christians, and one student who names no faith at all. A student intern serves as chair, and I am present as a semi observer. I open the room, greet students as they arrive, and then step to the margins while the chair guides the discussion. Dietary needs are recorded at the first meeting and honored quietly at every gathering. My role is to intervene only when necessary, so that the room can learn to speak and listen without relying on a staff voice.

On the final dinner of the first semester the chair set the topic as winter holydays and celebrations. The conversation began with familiar facts and then drifted toward comparison. The chair gently returned the group to lived experience by asking a series of simple questions. What makes a day a celebration in your community? What do bodies do on that day? Who prepares what? How does time change? What does home smell like? What do you hear? The room shifted in response. A Muslim student described the quiet before dawn and the first bite after a long fast. A Jewish student recalled the feel of candlelight and a week shaped toward a holy evening. A Christian student spoke of music in a sanctuary and a family recipe that appears only once a year. The group moved from what people had heard about others to what they practiced themselves and why it mattered.

As the chair gathered threads, the Council named patterns that travel across traditions. These patterns included fasting and feasting, the use of light in a dark season, songs that belong to a particular time, extra attention to neighbors, and a shared sense that time can be shaped for meaning. Naming these patterns did not collapse difference. Instead, it made difference easier to approach. Students asked better questions, rested more comfortably in the conversation, and discovered a way of speaking that felt both honest and spacious.

From my seat at the edge of the room I saw more than the growth of trust. I saw a skill take shape. Students learned to communicate about faith, to remain with first person testimony when debate would have been easier, to ask curious questions rather than seek agreement, and to hold convictions without placing pressure on one another. The students closed the evening with renewed interest in interfaith engagement. They proposed a site visit to a religious community that was not represented at the table, a visit that would allow them to listen, observe, and ask better questions. The work continues throughout the year, and trust continues to move.

Scene 2: Affiliates and Spiritual Care

Open Encounter also works because it honors both openness and limits. I serve all students for nonreligious spiritual care, yet I cannot offer what belongs to the pastoral leaders within specific traditions. A Catholic student who seeks confession needs a priest. A Muslim student who seeks guidance in law and practice needs an imam. The Affiliates model makes this boundary a strength rather than a barrier. Mentors from local communities provide leadership and care within their own traditions, and at the same time remain open and accessible to all.

One evening the Muslim Student Association gathered for Friday (Jummah) prayer and a shared meal. I arrived early to greet students as they filtered into the room. Our Jewish life advisor was already present, speaking with students near the food table and asking about their week. When prayer began, he removed his shoes, stepped quietly to the side, and took a seat in respectful silence while Muslim students prayed on rugs at the center of the room. After the prayer concluded he joined the circle again, shared the meal, and asked gentle questions about the upcoming observance of Ramadan. The imam, who serves as our Muslim life advisor, guided the prayer and handled the pastoral questions that followed. The Jewish advisor offered another kind of care through presence, hospitality, and friendship.

Students noticed this scene and often mentioned it in later conversations. One first year Muslim student told me it was the first time they had seen a non-Muslim adult honor their prayer space with such care. Another student said the moment helped them understand what interfaith respect can feel like in practice. These responses revealed how simple gestures can shape a community. Boundaries remained clear and leadership stayed rooted in tradition specific roles. At the same time, students saw leaders who refused rivalry and instead practiced neighborliness.

That ordinary evening carries the weight of Open Encounter. Agency is protected. Difference is named and welcomed. Yet walls are lowered by the way people show up for one another. What results is not dilution. It is recognition. Belonging strengthens because each person honors the practice of another without hesitation. At The Compass Center, the network anchors concrete practice with appropriate community and does not require staff to deliver confessional teaching.[1]

Scene 3: Series on Religion and Society

The Series on Religion and Society is a The Compass Center program that carries Open Encounter along the academic path. Each year the Series offers four events under a single theme, two in the fall and two in the spring, and it pairs with a Religious Studies course that follows the same topics. Students meet each visiting scholar for a small pre-event dinner, and afterward the lecture opens to the wider campus and community.

Within this year's theme, which explored religion and the popular imagination, one evening featured Dr. Justin Henry speaking on the topic of Sacred Stories on Television. His claim was straightforward and expansive: mass television can fix a single visual of a sacred story in public imagination, and repeated, emotionally charged viewing can give that depiction quasi-sacred weight. Using the Ramayana as the central case, students engaged Hindu tradition directly. Many

[1] John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen A. Mahoney, *The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

left the dinner and lecture recognizing how media, ritual, and memory intertwine across traditions they knew well and those they were just beginning to learn.

The dinner beforehand offered its own moment of learning. Students asked how scholars interpret diverse sources, how communities respond when a media portrayal becomes more widely known than the tradition itself, and how popular images can influence the practices of people who hold the story as sacred. A few students compared these dynamics with depictions of sacred figures in the traditions they knew from childhood. One student later told me that it was the first time they had understood why members of their own community reacted strongly to a televised depiction of a familiar story. The conversation provided a new vocabulary for describing a tension they had felt but never named.

In this setting, academic inquiry becomes its own form of encounter. It invites attention not only to churches, synagogues, and mosques, but also to temples, festivals, digital spaces, and cultural practices that may be less familiar. It is not the preferred path for every student, yet it remains an important one. It complements lived practice by giving language, method, and context to experiences that students have elsewhere on campus. In this way Open Encounter becomes ready for the classroom. Students learn to hold description and critique together, to honor thick particularity, and to recognize the social forces that shape how the sacred is imagined and shared.

The scenes above show how Open Encounter takes shape in daily practice. They illustrate how students learn, how leaders collaborate, and how community grows through simple habits of presence and respect. A brief view of student response offers a fuller picture and helps confirm that what we see in the room is also reflected in the experiences of those who participate.

Evidence So Far

Open Encounter has been successful in fostering belonging and learning across difference, and that success is visible through modest measures that fit the setting. In AY 2024–2025, The Compass Center administered an anonymized interactions survey to students who engaged at least one program (n = 143).[2] The survey predates my arrival and the formal naming of Open Encounter, and it reflects the thoughtful interfaith engagement the Center was already offering. The instrument combined brief Likert-type items on belonging, perceived safety, identity reflection, purpose exploration, wellbeing, leadership growth, and likelihood to recommend The Compass Center to a peer, along with one or two open-ended prompts. Results are descriptive and reported as the percentage of respondents to each item.

Among respondents who answered each item, 66.7% reported increased belonging and 67.7% reported increased safety. A total of 79.6% noted new opportunities to reflect on their own identity, and 79.6% noted new opportunities to reflect on the identities of others. Another 74.2% reported opportunities to explore purpose, and 71.0% named added value to overall wellbeing. Leadership growth appeared but was less uniform at 53.2%, and 59.4% indicated they would

[2] Randall Ojeda, “Interactions with the Center Survey, 2024 to 2025,” internal assessment archive, The Compass Center, Butler University.

recommend The Compass Center to a new student. These numbers do not prove a theory. They keep practice aligned with purpose and guide adjustments.

Student comments offer a human view of the same pattern. One student wrote that it was the first time they had spoken openly about their tradition with people outside of it and that they felt both respected and at ease. Another told me that a Religion and Society lecture helped them understand why a childhood story carried such emotional weight. Reflections like these show how norms of care, agency, and hospitality translate into student experience.

These outcomes align with the aims of Open Encounter. In our programs, being seen and belonging remain central, supported by attention to interreligious literacy and facilitation. Scholarship on interfaith leadership and findings from the IDEALS study suggest that appreciative knowledge, structured encounters, and shared action contribute to pluralism orientation and respectful peer attitudes.[3] The results match what we see in gatherings and align with wider research that connects clear norms, concrete hospitality, and shared ownership to belonging, and belonging to persistence.[4]

Personal Approach to Interfaith Practice

I work as the only Christian on an interfaith staff in a secular setting, and my practice is shaped by that plural environment. In shared spaces I speak from my own discipline without hesitation, and I guard the freedom of my neighbors with the same care that I want for my own tradition. Interfaith gatherings are not spaces for recruiting or persuasion. When formation within a tradition is desired, it is named clearly, offered on an opt in basis, and guided by leaders who stand within that tradition. This clarity protects agency and helps create a community where difference is welcomed without pressure.

My approach did not arise in a single moment. It grew through two long chapters of work that shaped how I understand conviction, curiosity, and care. At a similar sized institution, I led a Compelling Preaching initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment. That project formed small cohorts of Christian preachers across theological, socioeconomic, generational, and cultural difference. Working in those cohorts taught me how to hold conviction and curiosity together, and how to create structures that encourage people to speak from their lived practice rather than from abstract debate.

For eleven years I also served Latino congregations in pastoral ministry. Those years taught me that communities that appear uniform from a distance often hold deep internal diversity. They also taught me how careful structures can help people build life together across difference. In those settings I learned to listen closely, to practice patience, and to design spaces where people could stand within their own traditions while still engaging one another with generosity.

---

[3] Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Matthew J. Mayhew, and colleagues, *Friendships Matter: The Role of Peer Relationships in Interfaith Learning and Development* (Interfaith Youth Core and North Carolina State University, 2019).

[4] Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018); Vincent Tinto, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

These strands come together in what I now call Open Encounter. In the Interfaith Council I remain at the margin so students learn to speak from experience and to listen well. In the Affiliates network I defer confessional care to leaders who are best placed to provide it and stand with them in the common work of supporting students. In the Religion and Society Series I let inquiry lead so that students gain language, method, and context for what they observe and feel elsewhere on campus. Across these settings the guiding rule remains the same. Name where you stand. Refuse coercion. Hold agency and hospitality together.

Here is my answer to the question at the threshold. I can speak from my own practice without pressure, and I can protect the freedom of my neighbors. That posture is faithful to my tradition and fair to the community, and on our campus it has helped students report greater belonging and safety. Open Encounter is less a single insight than a living philosophy, shaped over years of relational and educational work that prepared me to hold complex identities with humility and openness.[5] In that way the threshold question is answered in practice and not in debate, and Open Encounter remains our promise to students.

Implications for Colleagues

The value of a framework is that it provides clear guardrails, especially when programs are diverse and student engagement takes many forms. Open Encounter offers a simple claim and a usable design. Protect agency. Invite people to speak from what they practice. Match access with integrity through concrete hospitality. In our setting this framework has held across spiritual care, interfaith engagement, and public education. It has also been measurable in small ways that help keep practice aligned with purpose.

For colleagues in other contexts, the work begins with translation rather than imitation. Every campus holds its own history, needs, and rhythms. Begin by naming one guiding rule that fits your setting and place it where students can see it. Choose one program and redesign it so that first person testimony leads and pressure is removed from the room. Invite a small circle of community mentors who can offer tradition specific care, and agree together on clear boundaries and shared norms. Keep assessment light and regular so that you gain insight without exhausting the people you serve. In time, practice becomes pattern, and pattern becomes culture.

If your campus is at an earlier stage, the first steps can be smaller still. Host a single meal with clear norms. Offer one co taught session with a community mentor. Add a short exit question that asks whether students felt seen and whether they would return. Each step can be modest and still move the work forward.

This is the promise of Open Encounter in a secular setting. It turns principle into design that students can inhabit. It supports transformational learning around spiritual life. It helps a dynamic campus community take root, one gathering, one habit, and one story at a time.

---

[5] John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Aziel Nuñez serves as Director of The Compass Center at Butler University, the campus hub for spiritual life and the center for meaning, purpose, and spiritual life. He is a lecturer at Christian Theological Seminary and a research assistant with the Rooted in Spirit project at the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis. His work focuses on agency centered design, interfaith engagement, and on the formation of students and communities across diverse traditions.

Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

Catherine Gillespie
Director of Spiritual and Religious Life
Quinnipiac University

Abstract: *This literature review synthesizes current empirical evidence on spirituality and religion in higher education to inform institutional practice and policy. First, religion and spirituality are defined. Second, the benefits of spirituality and religion among students in higher education are outlined and the struggles are highlighted. Third, how spirituality and religion are conceptually understood and assessed within a higher education environment is explored. Lastly, applications are presented, accompanied by recommendations for institutions and pragmatic suggestions for chaplains. This article is intended to be useful to novices in the field to help them explore their institutional role, or to share with others in the university who are unfamiliar with how integrated Spiritual and Religious Life can be to the mission of their institution.*

Keywords: *Dimensions of wellness, spiritual, religious, university, college, human flourishing*

This literature review synthesizes current empirical evidence on spirituality and religion in higher education to inform institutional practice and policy. First, religion and spirituality are defined. Second, the benefits of spirituality and religion among students in higher education are outlined and the struggles some students' experiences are highlighted. Third, how spirituality and religion are conceptually understood and assessed within a higher education environment is explored. Lastly, applications in higher education are presented, accompanied by recommendations and pragmatic suggestions. This article is intended to be useful to novices in the field to help them explore their institutional role, or to share with others in the university who are unfamiliar with how integrated Spiritual and Religious Life can be to the mission of their institution.

Understanding Spirituality and Religion

Scholars distinguish between spirituality and religion, while acknowledging their conceptual overlap. In a systematic review of the literature, Obregon and colleagues used this distinction:

> Religiosity affects how the person believes and follows a particular religion, being based on the beliefs and practices of the same...Meanwhile, spirituality is the individual pursuit to understand fundamental questions of life, such as the

> direction, the meaning and the end of it and the relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may or may not derive from religious belief.[1]

There are certainly other ways to distinguish between religion and spirituality, but for the purpose of this article, it is only necessary to accept that the definitions of religion and spirituality are not the same, but they do overlap. Note that the terms religiosity or religiousness are used when researchers look beyond religious affiliation to the regularity of one's religious practice and the personal importance of one's beliefs. Religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive, nor do they always go together. People can identify as religious, spiritual, or as both spiritual and religious. Especially in the developmentally transitional time of college,[2] students' practices and beliefs can change, as can the importance they place on their spiritual or religious life. One of the many developmental tasks of late adolescence is spiritual individuation,[3] defined as "the search for the sacred, emphasizing lived spiritual and existential experiences, and the formation of personal beliefs; sometimes associated with a disconnection from previously held family and moral values, religious affiliation, and spiritual beliefs."[4] As evidence of the many benefits of spirituality and religion among college students has grown, attention to spirituality and religion on campus has increased since the late 1900s.[5]

Benefits

Spirituality and religion can be seen as a part of students' holistic developmental needs[6] that engenders many prosocial developmental outcomes including ethics of care, charitable involvement, compassionate self-concept, a social justice orientation, personal growth, and lower levels of smoking, drinking, and drug abuse.[7] Benefits of students' individual practice of

---

[1] S.L. Obregon et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality and Work: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Directions," *Journal of Business Ethics* 179 (2022): 574.

[2] E.P. Backes and R.J. Bonnie, eds., *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (National Academies Press, 2019), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545476/.

[3] S.C. Scalora et al., "A campus-based spiritual-mind-body-prevention intervention against symptoms of depression and trauma; an open trial of Awakened Awareness," *Mental Health and Prevention* 25 (2022): 1-11; A. Tyagi, "Individuation: The Jungian process of spiritual growth," in *Explorations of human spirituality* (Global Vision Publishing House, 2008), 128-153.

[4] E.J. Mistur et al., "Inner Peace in a Global Crisis: A Case Study of Supported Spiritual Individuation in Acute Onset Phase of COVID-19," *Emerging Adulthood* 10, no. 6 (2022): 1544.

[5] M.D. Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education," *Journal of College and Character* 17, no. 3 (2016): 147-156.

[6] Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

[7] Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education."

spirituality or religion include higher levels of ethics and productivity,[8] lower levels of anxiety,[9] as well as prevention against stress, anxiety and depression among healthy, mostly college-age adults.[10] Pearce et al. captured many of the benefits of religion in college students when they wrote:

> More frequent religious service participation, regular prayer, and high importance attached to one's religious identity have all been linked to, on average, lower delinquency; less drinking, smoking, and drug abuse; later initiation of sexual activity; better mental and physical health; higher grades and educational attainment; and greater civic involvement.[11]

Spirituality also benefits students and is associated with reduced stress, anxiety and depression[12] -- higher levels of self-reported spirituality were associated with lower levels psychological distress for students. Even college students with otherwise poor mindsets can benefit from spirituality. A study comparing mindsets among Chinese university students found that if students held failure mindsets, those with spiritual coping techniques and a sense of meaning in their lives were less likely to suffer from suicidal ideation than those who did not have a spiritual coping techniques or a sense of meaning in their lives.[13] Similarly, students who placed a high level of importance on spirituality/religion and reported having life satisfaction and life meaning were less likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injury than others.[14] Overall, the benefits of spiritual and religious affiliations and practices benefit college students greatly. Despite these numerous benefits, spiritual and religious life is not uniformly positive for all students.

---

[8] Obregon et al., "Religiosity, Spirituality and Work."

[9] A.D. Cherniak, S. Pirutinski, and D.H. Rosmarin, "Does gender moderate effects of religion on anxiety among Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews?," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 24, no. 10 (2021): 1089-1100.

[10] C.C. Borges et al., "Association between spirituality/religiousness and quality of life among healthy adults: a systematic review," *Health Quality of Life Outcomes* 19, no. 246 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-021-01878-7.

[11] L.D. Pearce, J.E. Uecker, and M.L. Denton, "Religion and Adolescent Outcomes: How and Under What Conditions Religion Matters," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 202.

[12] C.H. Leung and H.K. Pong, "Cross-sectional study of the relationship between the spiritual wellbeing and psychological health among university Students," *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249702.

[13] J. Guo et al., "A serial mediation model of failure mindset and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students: The impact of meaning in life and spiritual coping," *Acta Psychologica* 255 (2025): 1-10.

[14] V.E. Kress et al., "Spirituality/religiosity, life satisfaction, and life meaning as protective factors for nonsuicidal self-injury in college students," *Journal of College Counseling* 18, no. 2 (2015): 160-174.

Challenges

When students struggle with their spirituality or religion, it can be very stressful. A meta-analysis of 32 research studies concluded that when people experience religious and spiritual struggles (tensions, conflict, or negative emotions around sacred matters), they faced statistically significant increases in negative psychological adjustment such that their wellbeing diminishes and their distress grows.[15] Although this struggle is very personal and unlikely ever to be easy to navigate, on-campus spiritual and other support can, at the very least, help students feel less alone. Ideally students can come to see their struggles as part of their overall development[16] and a chaplain or another person in a Spiritual and Religious Life role may be able to assist in that process.

Conceptual Understanding of Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

How the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life and the entire institution view the roles of spirituality and religion both in students' personal lives and throughout campus is important. College and university students' spirituality and religious beliefs and practices interact with campus life as a domain of wellness[17] as well as a potential contributor to human flourishing.[18] Chaplains and others working in Spiritual and Religious Life capacities can inform others of their important role in the university as a whole.

Human Flourishing Framework

The Human Flourishing movement casts a wide net, encompassing all skills and "qualities that support psychological and social wellbeing."[19] Human flourishing education involves "contemplative skills and perspectives related to conscious awareness, interconnection, and sense of purpose that lead to a life of meaning and service,"[20] which aligns with others' definitions of spirituality, and is partially explained by the authors who describe their curriculum as contemplative education.

---

[15] M.F. Bockrath et al., "Religious and spiritual struggles and their links to psychological adjustment: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (2022): 283-299.

[16] Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

[17] M. Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity of the Wellness Inventory," *Psychiatric Services* 76, no. 3 (2024); P. Swarbrick and J. Yudoff, *Wellness in 8 Dimensions* (Freehold, NJ: Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, Inc., 2015).

[18] B.A. Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation of a college course on human flourishing improve student flourishing during COVID-19? A multi-university study," *Journal of American College Health* 73, no. 4 (2025): 1837-1846.

[19] Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation," 1838.
[20] Colaianne et al., "Can the virtual implementation," 1837.

Human flourishing is often measured using an 8-item assessment, which has recently been found to be a trait (rather than state) measurement, meaning it tends to be stable over time.[21] In psychological assessment terminology, "traits" are stable and therefore resistant to change, whereas "states" are more malleable and open to change in response to changes in behavior or attitudes. Although students' scores on the Flourishing Scale could reflect participation in a supportive community such as a spiritual or religious organization, its stability over time means that college students who participate in spiritual or religious activities on campus and score high on the Flourishing Scale likely started out with high scores and have maintained those high scores throughout their entire undergraduate experience.

Dimensions of Wellness Approach

Since it has been shown empirically that Human Flourishing is a stable trait, the Dimensions of Wellness construct may show more promise to conceptualize and assess the benefits of higher education students' participation in spiritual or religious activities on campus because it promises to be more responsive to changes in students' behavior and attitudes. The Eight Dimensions of Wellness are: Physical, Mental/Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Intellectual, Environmental, Occupational, and Financial.[22] This conceptual framework has developmental underpinnings. Each dimension of wellness is an area in which every person ideally experiences development during the late adolescent years, which are ages 18 to 24.[23] Combining a developmental perspective with the Dimensions of Wellness construct draws together two ways of looking at college students: developmentally (over time) and dimensionally (across many areas of life) for a more holistic conceptualization.

Assessment Considerations

It is recommended that institutions employ a conceptualization and assessment that can be responsive to changes in students' experiences, behavior, and attitudes. An early Eight Dimensions of Wellness self-assessment[24] consisted of a 10-item Spiritual Wellness checklist:

1. I can name my own personal values and describe my beliefs about life.
2. I make conscious choices about my daily actions based on my personal values.
3. When I get depressed or frustrated, I draw on my beliefs and values to give me direction.
4. I use prayer, meditation, and/or quiet personal reflection regularly in my life.
5. Life is meaningful for me, and I feel a purpose in life.

---

[21] B.A. Varga et al., "How Long do We Flourish? A Flourishing State or Trait? A Longitudinal Examination of the Diener Flourishing Scale," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 26, no. 87 (2025): 1-27.

[22] M.H. Mayol, B.M. Scott, and J.B. Schreiber, "Validation and Use of the Multidimensional Wellness Inventory in Collegiate Student-Athletes and First-Generation Students," *American Journal of Health Education* 48, no. 5 (2017): 338-350; Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity."

[23] Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*.

[24] Swarbrick and Yudoff, *Wellness in 8 Dimensions*, 10.

6. I try to learn about others' beliefs and values, especially those that are different from my own.
7. I have a strong sense of optimism and faith in the future.
8. I use my thoughts and attitudes in life-affirming ways.
9. I appreciate the natural forces that exist in the universe.
10. I feel gratitude for the good things in my life.

Swarbrick et al. validated a shortened version of their Wellness Inventory, wherein Spiritual Wellness is now collapsed into four items, scored on a 4-point Likert scale of Always, Sometimes, Rarely, or Never:[25]

1. I reflect on my own personal values and beliefs
2. I use quiet personal reflection regularly
3. I reflect quietly each day
4. I feel a sense of purpose each day

Another similar approach to the same Eight Dimension of Wellness defined spiritual wellness as "One's awareness and engagement in communication, attitude, civility, personal relationships, and contributions made to one's surroundings, community, and society" and provided this sample item for spiritual wellness, "I work to continually explore and expand my personal beliefs, values, and priorities."[26] Both Eight Dimensions of Wellness assessments support a conceptualization of spirituality and religion that can be integrated into other wellness efforts across campus and can have the potential to show changes over time in response to students' engagement in spiritual and religious activities on campus.

Institutional Applications

Institutions of higher education have many opportunities to provide mental health prevention and early intervention for students, who are suffering with greater mental health challenges now than ever before.[27] Using the Eight Dimension of Wellness construct, these opportunities fit into the Spiritual Wellness category and extend well beyond them. Late adolescence is a key developmental time for students,[28] which higher education professionals and institutions already actively support.

---

[25] Swarbrick et al., "Factor structure, reliability, and construct validity," 267.

[26] Mayol, Scott, and Schreiber, "Validation and Use," 342-343.

[27] A. Duffy, "University student mental health: An important window of opportunity for prevention and early intervention," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 68, no. 7 (2023): 495-498.

[28] Backes and Bonnie, *The Promise of Adolescence*; Waggoner, "Spirituality and Contemporary Higher Education."

Examples of Programming in Spirituality

How higher education professionals and institutions choose to respond to students' spiritual and religious needs varies by context, but there are models to follow. For instance, first year university students who were given free access to a mindfulness meditation app showed improvement in distress and college adjustment compared to controls.[29] Similarly, college students who enrolled in a one-credit mindfulness class experienced lower stress levels and a higher quality of life by the end of the course compared to controls who did not take the course.[30] A more comprehensive spiritual-mind-body prevention intervention yielded benefits to participating students in the areas of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.[31] Authors argued in favor of targeted spiritual-mind-body programs to nurture the developmental task of spiritual individuation within the college environment. Multiple approaches exist for institutions of higher education to offer spiritual support to students at the individual and group levels.

Recommendations

Below are five recommendations for institutions of higher education based on the above literature review:

1. Decide on a conceptual framework for how students' spirituality and religion fit into campus life.
2. Choose assessments aligned with the conceptual framework.
3. Remember that even though students' mental health needs are growing, spirituality and religion can aide them greatly in a multitude of ways.
4. Also remember that some students will be struggling with their previously held spiritual or religious practices and beliefs, and they might need extra support.
5. Utilize religious and non-religious chaplains.

Chaplains

University chaplains can contribute to and support of students' spiritual and religious development. Spiritual care can be effectively delivered by religious and non-religious chaplains. Non-religious (sometimes referred to as interfaith) chaplains are well-positioned to provide neutrality around religion and focus more on students' spiritual development by meeting students

---

[29] J.A.M. Flett et al., "App-based mindfulness meditation for psychological distress and adjustment to college in incoming university students: a pragmatic, randomised, waitlist-controlled trial," *Psychology and Health* 35, no. 9 (2020): 1049-1074.

[30] M.W. St. Martin, Z. Vidic, and R. Oxhandler, "Exploring the impact of a mindfulness meditation class on college student stress levels and quality of life," *Journal of American College Health* 72, no. 8 (2024): 2829-2835.

[31] Scalora et al., "A campus-based spiritual-mind-body-prevention intervention."

where they are and not trying to fix them.[32] Regardless of chaplaincy designation, they can help in a variety of situations, including suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.[33] Chaplains are resources in higher education who can help students directly in addition to contributing to a larger university plan to meet students' spiritual and religious needs within a developmental framework of overall wellness. Based on the literature review above, below are ten areas with practical suggestions for chaplains or others in Spiritual and Religious Life to consider implementing to enhance students' spirituality and support their holistic development within the higher education context.

1. Prioritize meeting students where they are spiritually, recognizing that late adolescence is a critical period for spiritual individuation. This means creating non-judgmental spaces where students can explore fundamental questions about life's meaning, direction, and their relationship with the sacred or transcendent—whether or not they identify with a particular religious tradition. Chaplains can facilitate this exploration through one-on-one pastoral conversations that help students articulate their personal values and beliefs without imposing predetermined answers.
2. Establish contemplative practice opportunities that are accessible to students across the spiritual and religious spectrum. This could include offering regular meditation sessions, mindfulness groups, or contemplative prayer circles. Chaplains might coordinate access to meditation apps, facilitate drop-in meditation spaces in campus chapels or interfaith centers, or teach brief mindfulness workshops that help students develop skills for managing stress while deepening their spiritual awareness.
3. Develop targeted support for students experiencing spiritual struggles, recognizing that tensions around sacred matters can significantly impact wellbeing. Chaplains can create structured programs such as small-group discussions where students wrestling with doubt, religious disaffiliation, or conflicts between childhood beliefs and emerging identities can process these challenges communally. Individual spiritual direction sessions can also help students reframe their struggles as part of healthy development rather than as failures.
4. Integrate spiritual wellness into broader campus wellness initiatives by partnering with counseling centers, health services, and student life offices. Chaplains can advocate for the inclusion of spiritual wellness in campus-wide wellness assessments and programming, helping the institution adopt frameworks like the Eight Dimensions of Wellness. This might involve co-facilitating workshops that connect spiritual practices

[32] A. Lawton, A. Anderson, and W. Cadge, "Nonreligious chaplains and spiritual care," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023): 1166.

[33] S.M. Saliba, "The contributions of university chaplains, as spiritual care professionals, to suicide prevention: results from a European expert panel," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 27, no. 2 (2025): 222-249.

with mental health, co-presenting at orientation about holistic student development, or serving on wellness committees to ensure spiritual dimensions are not overlooked.

5. Create structured opportunities for values clarification and meaning-making. Chaplains can lead workshops or retreats focused on helping students identify their core values, reflect on life purpose, and connect daily actions to deeper beliefs. This could include facilitated journaling exercises, values-sorting activities, or service-learning experiences with built-in reflection components that help students explore how their actions align with their evolving spiritual commitments.
6. Build interfaith literacy and dialogue programs that help students learn about diverse spiritual and religious traditions. Students are hungry to learn about beliefs different from their own and this education can reduce religious tension on campus. Chaplains might organize interfaith panel discussions, coordinate visits to different houses of worship, facilitate scriptural reasoning groups, or create shared sacred meals where students from various traditions gather to explore common spiritual themes.
7. Establish rituals and practices that mark important transitions in students' lives. Chaplains can develop blessing ceremonies for students facing major decisions, grief rituals for those experiencing loss, gratitude practices during times of celebration, or end-of-semester reflection services. These practices help students develop spiritual resources they can draw upon during difficult times and cultivate habits of recognizing the sacred in everyday life.
8. Offer mind-body-spirit interventions that address the interconnection between spiritual wellbeing and mental health. Chaplains could develop multi-week courses combining contemplative practices, body awareness, and spiritual reflection to help students build resilience against depression, anxiety, and trauma. These programs should be designed with attention to spiritual individuation, supporting students as they form personal beliefs.
9. Provide training and resources for the broader campus community on supporting students' spiritual development. Chaplains can educate resident advisors, academic advisors, and faculty about recognizing when students might benefit from spiritual support and how to make appropriate referrals. They can also develop accessible resources—prayer spaces, reflection guides, lists of spiritual practices—that students can engage with independently.
10. Contribute expertise to suicide prevention and crisis response efforts, recognizing chaplains' unique role in addressing existential distress. This includes serving on campus crisis teams, providing postvention support after campus tragedies, and helping students find meaning and hope during profound difficulties. Chaplains' training in holding space for ultimate questions positions them to offer distinctive support that complements clinical mental health services.

By implementing these practices that grow out of the review of relevant literature above, chaplains and others in Spiritual and Religious Life can effectively support the spiritual

dimension of students' holistic development while contributing to broader institutional goals of student flourishing, mental health prevention, and the cultivation of meaning, purpose, and ethical engagement in students' lives.

After 17 years as a professor of Child Development and Early Childhood Education, Dr. Catherine Gillespie moved into an administrative role in higher education for 12 years, during which time she became a spiritual director. These experiences led her to desire to combine her two vocations and is now she in her first year as the Director of Spiritual and Religious Life at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT.

Too Busy to Rest: The Pause Retreat

Kaleb Loomis
Associate Chaplain
Southern Methodist University

Abstract: *The Pause Retreat was a new initiative at Southern Methodist University designed to address student stress, burnout, and overcommitment through a 24-hour off-campus experience focused on rest and wellness. Supported by a Student Affairs grant, the retreat aimed to engage 50 students but ultimately drew only a limited number of participants, revealing barriers such as scheduling conflicts and lack of financial investment. Despite low turnout, post-retreat surveys indicated meaningful growth in participants' understanding of rest and appreciation for connection and reflection. This case highlights the tension between student busyness and wellbeing efforts, offering key insights into timing, accountability, and communication for future programs. The Pause Retreat underscores the importance—and challenge—of helping students slow down in a culture that rarely allows it.*

Keywords: *Student wellness, retreat, wellbeing, mental health, rest, experiential learning, student success, higher education programs, student Engagement*

Context/Background

Like many of their peers across the nation, students at our mid-sized university are ambitious, high-achieving, and overscheduled. In this hyper-focused environment of resume building and accolades, it is rare to find a student who only has one major or hasn't participated in at least one internship before the end of their sophomore year. Our student body is encapsulated by ensuring that they do not "fall behind" their peers. While often self-imposed, they are overinvolved, stressed out, and—simply put—tired. Students often report not knowing how to rest or how to reenergize themselves amidst their busy schedules. Colleagues from the offices of Religious Life, Housing, and Wellbeing Education came together in the Fall Semester of 2024 to combat this environment of restlessness among our students by hosting a new initiative: The Pause Retreat.

Empowered both by a grant from the Division of Student Affairs and the support of the University's Wellbeing Commission, the Pause Retreat would be a free opportunity for students to explore rest and wellness in their daily lives. Students would not only learn about the different dimensions of wellness but also have the opportunity to put rest into practice in this off-site, 24-hour retreat. Unfortunately, our envisioned restful retreat weekend did not go according to plan. Despite initial student interest and ease of accessibility, our highest goals for the retreat's impact fell short for our students. Regardless of the outcomes, our team learned several valuable lessons as we continue to find the balance between meeting student needs and obtaining student buy-in while planning impactful programs.

Specifics of Case

Retreat Overview

The Pause Retreat was a new initiative to address concerns of stress, loneliness, and burnout among university students. This 24-hour retreat would take students to a local campsite in order to pause in the semester, practice rest, and learn about self-care over the Fall Break weekend in October 2024. Our team, with representatives from the offices of Religious Life, Housing, and Wellbeing Education, received a grant that would allow us to provide this retreat experience free of charge to 50 students. The retreat had four identified learning outcomes. As a result of attending the Pause Retreat, students would:

- Connect with their peers through intentional conversations and activities about rest.
- Identify different types of rest and practice resting in ways that best suit their lifestyle.
- Articulate the importance of rest and the best practices for implementing rest into their lives on-campus.
- Improve their habits and practices for rest and self-care.

To assess these learning outcomes, students would complete both pre- and post-experience surveys. We set the schedule of the retreat to include community-building moments, facilitated sessions for learning, and informal opportunities to practice rest. Below is an outline of our schedule for the retreat:

Friday	
2:00 PM	Gather in Student Center
2:30 PM	Depart Campus
4:30 PM	Arrive at Camp
5:30 PM	Dinner
7:00 PM	Kick-Off Session
8:00 PM-10:00 PM	Late Night Activities

Saturday	
7:00 AM	Yoga
8:00 AM	Breakfast
10:00 AM	Group Session
11:00 AM-3:00 PM	Free Rest Time & Lunch
3:00 PM	Closing Session
4:00 PM	Clean-up & Pack-up
4:30 PM	Depart Camp
6:30 PM	Arrive at Camp

Recruitment

During the beginning of the Fall semester, we held ample recruiting initiatives to generate interest and raise awareness including tabling during Move-In Weekend, advertising to the Parents and Families Network, and targeted recruiting to students who were struggling with rest or loneliness. We received much positive feedback from students and staff regarding this opportunity as we headed into our recruiting period. We hoped that the free cost of the experience as well as the flexibility of the Fall Break weekend would make this trip accessible to any student who wanted to attend. Students would need to fill out a short application, and spots were on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Results

The inaugural Pause Retreat had mixed results. On the one hand, we did not meet our expectations for student participation. At the end of the application period, only 18 students had applied to attend, far short of our anticipated 50 spots. This shortfall turned out even worse than expected as only 6 students attended the event—2 undergraduate students and 4 graduate students. We lost 12 participants from the experience in the 24 hours leading up to the trip. Ironically, many of these participants cited being "too busy" as their primary reason for backing out of the experience. Our team had anticipated some loss of signed up participants, but we could not have imagined losing so many all at once. Obviously, the loss of two-thirds of our participants drastically impacted our overall cost per participant due to pre-booked lodging, transportation, and meals; as such, this initiative turned out to be more costly than we had anticipated. Despite initial student interest prior to the recruitment period, our desired participation fell drastically short of expectations.

On the other hand, however, this experience met our expectations for the student impact and experience. Throughout the retreat, participants expressed their thankfulness for the intentional opportunity to create space to rest free of charge. More so, participants had ample opportunity to explore their personal rest practices and envision how they might incorporate regular rest in their daily lives. In the pre- and post-experience surveys, several themes emerged among participant responses including the following:

- **Increased Positive Evaluations in Personal Rest**: On average, participants reported higher agreement on their evaluations of rest after attending the Pause Retreat. Additionally, participants responded with more detailed definitions of rest after attending the Retreat. Participants were given the opportunity to explore types of rest and think about their personal philosophy behind rest throughout the retreat.

- **Exploring Creative Rest:** Our Free Time Rest activities on Saturday provided several opportunities for participants to practice "Creative Rest" and participants gravitated towards these types of activities. "Creative Rest" included activities and practices that involved creative expression such as painting, drawing, playing with playdough, free writing, etc. Participants were asked to list the types of rest that they currently practiced prior to attending the retreat. Afterwards, they were asked to list the types of rest that they

wanted to incorporate more after the retreat. Creative Rest had the highest increase in the Pre and Post Surveys. Prior to the retreat, 80% of participants indicated that they did not incorporate Creative Rest in their normal practice. After the retreat, 80% of participants indicated that they wanted to utilize this type of practice going forward.

- **Lack of Spiritual Rest**: "Spiritual Rest" was also included in the list of types of Rest for Participants to report on. Notably, Spiritual Rest was not selected by most participants (40%) in both the Pre and Post Surveys. What is most surprising about this data is the fact that 4 of the 6 participants were graduate students in the school of theology.

- **Rest and Connect**: In general, participants expressed two important takeaways from their experience on the Pause Retreat. First, participants appreciated the opportunity to create intentional space to rest during the semester and explore new practices. Additionally, participants noted the opportunity to connect with others while on the retreat as impactful.

- **Recommend to a Friend**: Finally, all participants indicated that they would recommend friends to attend the Pause Retreat in the future based off their experience.

While our expected participation was not met, our team believed that we met the most important learning outcomes for our students during this new experience. Offering opportunities for students to connect with one another and slow down amidst their hectic schedules remains a worthwhile goal. We strived to provide a creative way to address our students' expressed concerns over stress and busyness, but this particular experience did not engage in the breadth of impact we would have liked. The students who attended had an incredibly positive experience. The main issue of future endeavors center around the cost of offering this kind of opportunity and engaging student interest on this topic.

Reflections and Areas of Improvement

In reflection on the overall initiative, the leaders of the Pause Retreat had the following observations and areas of improvement for future retreat weekends on rest:

Participant Follow-Through

As mentioned above, we lost 12 of our 18 students who had initially signed up to attend in the 24 hours leading up to the retreat. Most students indicated not having enough time to attend as being the reason they needed to cancel. The leaders suspected a few factors at play in these circumstances:

- Lack of Financial Commitment: Because the retreat was free, students did not have any financial investment or incentive to follow through with their commitment. Future retreats should highly consider requiring a small registration fee at minimum to limit students backing out. Of course, special circumstances could be considered on a case-by-case basis to maintain wider accessibility for participation.

- Time of Year: The Fall Semester was originally chosen to provide an opportunity to rest during what is typically a more hectic semester for many students (Football weekends, Fraternity & Sorority Recruitment, new year activities, etc.). Counterintuitively, the busyness of the Fall semester may have limited students perceived ability to attend this kind of experience. Simply put, students may not have felt they had the time and space to attend this kind of retreat weekend given their other commitments. As such, the Spring Semester may prove to be a more worthwhile season of the year to host this kind of experience.

Retreat Finances

The lack of participant follow-through resulted in increased cost per participant; thereby, these circumstances jeopardize the sustainability of offering this retreat experience. Transportation ended up being the largest financial burden on our financial commitments. Future retreat experiences should have a smaller attendance cap until there is further student demand. Limiting participation to 20 (two 12-passenger vans) would allow for ease on transportation costs as well as flexibility in case of cancelations.

Older Students

Leaders noted that the attendees were primarily older undergraduate students or graduate students. As such, this type of experience may cater to older, more mature students rather than the wider undergraduate population. Future retreats focused on this kind of formative work might consider intertwining topics around life after graduation or rest in professional life as these themes might further interest the students who are already more likely to attend this kind of experience. Furthermore, a graduate specific opportunity may be worthwhile to consider in the future.

Marketing

Finally, we learned from anecdotal conversations with students that they saw the marketing for the retreat but were uncertain of what it was and did not ask further questions. Marketing in the future should focus on providing a more in-depth description of the experience or further opportunities for interested students to receive more information Additionally, intentional outreach to specific groups and student organizations may provide opportunities to provide clarity.

Questions to Ponder

In addition to the reflections listed above, those considering offering retreat experiences on their campuses might consider the following questions:

- What are the unforeseen limitations to participation in the life of your university?
- How can you best balance financial commitment from students with accessibility?
- Like with our older undergraduate or graduate students, are there student populations that certain experiences better cater towards?

- How do you engage with irony of busy schedules interfering with opportunities to engage in opportunities for rest? How are your campus cultures setting up students to fail or succeed in this area?

Overall, offering this retreat was invaluable to learning how to best engage with students—albeit still disappointing. We had hoped to offer a unique opportunity for students to bond and practice resting. Despite our best efforts, we fell short of our goals. The impact on the students who attended, however, demonstrate the worthwhileness of these kinds of experiences. Our challenge in the future is to be able to offer such formative experiences while attracting and retaining the students who most need them.

Kaleb Loomis is the Associate Chaplain at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. He designs and leads strategic programs and initiatives that help students explore their identities, connect with others, and live out their values.

Teaching Discernment: A Case Study

Erica Adarkwa
Assistant Director of Restorative Practices
Yale University

Jenny Peek
Co-Pastor of the University Church
& Associate University Chaplain
Yale University

Abstract: *In response to increased anxiety and fear about the future, two chaplains created a discernment workshop for students on their campus. This case study explores how the need for the workshop arose, the content of the workshop, and key takeaways and participant anecdotes.*

Keywords: *retreat, discernment, anxiety, values*

Context:

Our students are facing a series of uphill battles: political and ecological crises, ongoing and exacerbated inequality, and an ever-increasing sense of isolation and loneliness. As chaplains, their sense of fear and anxiety is not lost on us. These are unstable times for everyone.

In our commitment to walking alongside students at Yale University, we have noticed an ongoing and emerging trend: college-aged students are channeling their overwhelming anxiety into finding perfect, lucrative, and stable careers. Their desire to shape a life full of meaning and purpose has been narrowed by the notion that only well-worn career pathways will offer stability and protection from vulnerability and turmoil. This last sentiment is especially felt at Yale.

In conversation with students, we have heard an oft repeated sentiment that people attend Yale to secure jobs at a handful of prominent companies in finance and tech. The company names matter less than what these institutions have come to represent for our students: a seemingly surefooted step towards professional and financial stability, and therefore, a successful and fulfilling life. This is something that we have noticed across socioeconomic status, cultural identity, class year, and area of academic study/major. While the pressures that might lead them towards the desire for these careers are diverse, the choices students are making about their futures remain similar.

With that said, as students are choosing these career paths, we hear that some of them feel constrained and dissatisfied. They are longing for livelihoods that speak to their commitments and values, and they recognize that the paths they are choosing are not always in alignment with their passions and interests. The roadmap to creating lives rooted in meaning, purpose, and stability is becoming increasingly opaque and difficult to discern for our students.

In 2024, we decided to intervene. We designed a workshop offering tools for discernment and the opportunity for students to reflect on what had inspired them in the past and how that

inspiration might guide their future steps. Students left the workshop with their own personal compass which allowed them to stay oriented inside their values and passions. Here, we offer our workshop design in the hope that it might be useful for chaplains across higher education as they walk alongside students who are striving to build meaningful and flourishing futures.

Finding Our Way: Discernment and Decision-Making Workshop Design

Time: 90 minutes

Location: A cozy space is ideal. The space should accommodate a group of up to 15 students sitting in a circle with space to draw and spread out for private reflection time. It is best to not use tables. The aim is to avoid the feel of a classroom experience.

Audience: Workshops usually are offered to specific populations throughout the year, including for: Seniors, any Undergraduate students, Graduate and Professional Students, and Postdoctoral Fellows

Supplies: Handouts, clipboards (so that students do not need a table to draw), pencils and colored pencils, white board/easel with large post-its, compasses

Agenda:

Opening Introductions

Discernment: What is it?

Introduce students to the concept of discernment, including brief introductions to how discernment is understood within Abrahamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. We emphasize that discernment is not limited to vocational discernment. Discernment can be utilized whenever making decisions about our day-to-day lives and relationships.

After introducing students to the concept of discernment, we encourage them to consider what strategies and tools they already use when making important decisions in their lives. Students often name talking to friends, seeking advice from family or mentors, taking alone time on a walk, prayer, etc.

Considering Howard Thurman & Coming Alive

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive" - Howard Thurman

Invite students to reflect together on Thurman's words. Share within the large group some examples of when they feel they have "come alive." Examples often include: hiking, walking along the ocean, spending time with close friends, getting lost in a book, etc. This opening reflection helps students see that there are many ways to activate presence, joy, and curiosity.

Value Mapping and Building their Compass

Using the materials and instructions below, introduce and explain the Value Mapping activity. Allot 20 minutes to complete. Materials include:

- A simple, printed outline of a compass
- A list of over 100 different values drawn from Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* work
- A handout explaining the activity
- A physical compass and small piece of paper that can be taped to the compass
- Colored pencils

Invite students to look at the list of values and initially choose 10 that resonate with them. Encourage students to narrow that list of 10 values down to just four guiding values. Ask them to write each value on the compass, over the major cardinal directions (North, East, South, West.)

Using the intermediate directions (NE, SE, SW, NW) and the space between the cardinal directions, students are then invited to write the previously generated examples of what makes them come alive.

After everyone has had time to fill their page with their values and examples of what makes them come alive, give them time to consider how all of these elements interact.

After twenty minutes, invite students to share in small groups how they felt doing the exercise. Then invite sharing with the large group. Students might share what they discovered about themselves, what became clear, what was difficult, etc. Note that we do not encourage students to share what four values they chose–we let this remain private so that they are not apt to compare themselves to others.

Hand out the compasses and give students time to write their four values on a small piece of paper they can tape to the compass and keep.

Stargazing and Thinking about the Future

Now that the students have articulated what they value and when they feel more alive, we share one final metaphor with them. This metaphor is meant to offer a new framework for thinking about how they can use their compasses when making decisions about their futures.

We often comment that this metaphor has been helpful to each of us when making decisions about our lives over the years. The metaphor is below:

> Oftentimes, when thinking about the future, we have been taught to see ourselves climbing an imaginary ladder. With the ladder as our model, it is easy to assume that the only options in life are to be moving forward, moving backward, or being stuck and stagnant. This linear model creates false pressure and assumes that there are decidedly "right" and "wrong" choices for one's future and that one is constantly at risk of regressing. The ladder can also encourage us to feel trapped within a path that we have chosen – assuming that the sunk cost of the time or effort we have extended in a relationship or career means that we should stay the course even when the course is not satisfying.
>
> Instead, what might decision making about our future feel like if we used stargazing as our guiding metaphor? Life is a lot like a starry night. You look up at the stars and they are beautiful and vast. Over time, humans have drawn constellations, connecting the dots between various stars, creating an image. What if we looked at our lives as if they are ever evolving constellations? In looking back, trust that you'll see how the stars connect. When looking forward, go to the stars that nourish you, that create a sense of curiosity or "aliveness" within you, and that connect you to others. Trust that if you go where you feel alive, even if some stars prove to be fleeting or false, you'll grow and learn. These stars become a part of your constellation in ways yet unforeseen.

Give students time to write out a few of their personal reactions to this metaphor and then reflect as a group on how this way of considering the future does and does not map onto their own ways of thinking about decision making and the future. Students often reflect that they like the idea of stargazing, but they find letting go of the perceived controllability and certainty of the ladder daunting.

Closing Reflection

Offer students one final handout that includes the following questions:

- What may you need to navigate what's ahead? What do you need to support living into your values?

- What tools do you already have available to you? (i.e. talking to a mentor, taking a walk, talking to a friend or family member, spiritual or religious resources) How can you create space in your life here at [our institution] to access these tools and resources?

Depending on how much time is left, give students time to reflect personally and share out as a group, or just reflect personally for five minutes.

End the time together by inviting each participant to share one thought or "nugget" from our time together that they want to take with them.

Workshop Takeaways:

We have received very positive feedback from students who have participated in the workshop. Since its launch we have also adapted it for retreats within religious communities and with postdoctoral fellows. We plan to continue to adapt it to support our staff and faculty who are more settled in their vocations but are feeling limited in their ability to live the lives they want within their careers.

Across populations, the metaphors of the compass and stargazing have been quite impactful. We are hopeful that this workshop will be an inspiration for participants' life journeys, inviting them to name and consider their values and what makes them feel most alive in the world.

Participant Anecdotes:

- An undergrad whose parents have been encouraging her to pursue medical school for most of her life has since decided to take time away from school after graduating to explore if she would like to be a teacher or professor. While the journey to this decision was complex and layered, she recalled the metaphor of stargazing and Howard Thurman's words as being key to helping her feel more courageous when informing her parents of her decision.
- An undergrad who expressed interest in being a teacher has decided to commit herself to working for a large financial firm. She has mixed feelings about this decision but shared that the questions she is asking about what she needs in her future have shifted in tenor. Since attending the workshop, in one-on-one pastoral care meetings, she has been naming her desire to explore how she can sustain, protect, and reinforce her values and sense of self when in a work environment that has different bottom lines than what is more important to her sense of purpose.
- A postdoc who has been having a difficult time deciding if she would like to stay in academia or not has decided to leave academia. She realized that while she is good at her work, it does not make her "feel alive." She has since discovered a love of writing fiction in her native language and is pursuing careers that lend themselves to more work/life balance so she has time to write. She credits the exercise of making her compass and

discerning her values as being helpful tools for choosing a path that her academic mentors don't understand but her friends celebrate.

As chaplains, we have been moved by the lasting impact a metaphor or two can have to nurture courage, trust, and agency in the individuals we are supporting. While we consider our own future adaptations, we sincerely hope that this offering might be useful and impactful for other chaplains in higher education. In the ongoing uncertainty of these times, we sense that the need for discernment tools and reflection will only increase. By equipping our community with new insights and tools, we hope to expand their imaginations and nurture a sense of possibility in their lives.

Erica Adarkwa is the Assistant Director of Restorative Practices at Yale University. Erica is a dedicated student of Black feminist practice and is passionate about building and contributing to visions of care that center our wholeness and dignity. Prior to joining Restorative Practices, she served as an Assistant Chaplain at Yale and supported students across the university as they made connections between their values and practice. She is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School and Brown University.

Rev. Jenny Peek is the Co-Pastor of the University Church in Yale and Associate University Chaplain. She has served in the Yale University Chaplain's Office since 2017. She comes to the Chaplain's Office after receiving a Master of Divinity with certificates in Educational Leadership Ministry and Reformed Studies from Yale Divinity School. Jenny is ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Improving Campus Climate for Students of all Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identities: The INSPIRES Index as a Best Practice in Chaplaincy

Anisha Gill-Morris
Lead Graduate Research Associate for the INSPIRES Index project
The Ohio State University

Emily Creamer
Research Director for the College Impact Laboratory
The Ohio State University

Matthew J. Mayhew
William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration
The Ohio State University

Abstract*: There is an urgent need for RSSI-focused assessment tools that generate actionable data to guide institutional change. The INSPIRES Index emerges as a vital, free resource for this purpose. This paper examines how the Index empowers chaplains to lead campus-wide initiatives that support students across a diverse spectrum of religious, spiritual, and secular worldview identities.*

Keywords: *Campus Climate; RSSI; Assessment; Sense of belonging; INSPIRES*

Context

Assessment in higher education functions as a systematic process for gathering and interpreting information to improve educational quality.[1] When applied to college campus climate, assessment moves institutions beyond anecdotes toward credible, disaggregated evidence about whether students experience the environment as inclusive, respectful, and supportive, and helps identify the gaps that persist across groups and campus units. Importantly, the value of assessment lies not in measurement alone but in closing the loop: linking results to concrete changes in policy, practice, and resource allocation, followed by reassessment to evaluate whether those changes improved conditions.[2]

Campus climate assessment is particularly consequential because climate is multidimensional and shaped by both interpersonal experiences and structural conditions.[3] Climate can capture

---

[1] Banta, Trudy W., and Catherine A. Palomba. *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014; Suskie, Linda. *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

[2] Ewell, P. T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement. *NILOA Occasional Paper*, *1*.

[3] Hurtado, Sylvia, Kimberly A. Griffin, Lucy Arellano, and Marcela Cuellar. "Assessing the value of climate assessments: Progress and future directions." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 1, no. 4 (2008): 204; Rankin, Susan R., and Robert Dean Reason. "Differing perceptions: How students of color and white students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups." *Journal of college student development* 46, no. 1 (2005): 43-61.

students' sense of belonging, perceptions of fairness, exposure to bias or discrimination, and confidence that institutional processes (e.g., dining services, advising, support services) are accessible and responsive. Hurtado et al. (2008) argue that campus assessments are most useful when they integrate (a) indicators of climate perceptions and experiences, (b) documentation of institutional practices and interventions that structure those experiences, and (c) student outcomes that reflect learning, engagement, and success. This integration helps institutions, and the chaplains they employ, identify not only whether inequities exist but also which institutional conditions may be producing them, creating clearer targets for improvement.

Assessment also matters because campus climate is linked to student retention and graduation through the conditions it creates for belonging, academic and social integration, engagement, and students' willingness to seek support.[4] Persistence research has long emphasized that students are more likely to remain enrolled when they experience supportive relationships and perceive the institution as committed to their success.[5] Scholarship on student success highlights that educational environments that foster engagement through supportive advising, meaningful involvement, and effective teaching are associated with beneficial outcomes, including persistence.[6] In this way, climate assessment is not separate from hard metrics such as retention and graduation; rather, it may help chaplains explain why those outcomes vary and which levers institutions can use to improve them.

The Problem: The Need for an RSSI Assessment

Arguably, higher education assessment has largely overlooked how institutional structures, policies, and practices shape the campus climate for students with diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs). This gap became particularly evident after the events of October 7th, 2023, when college campuses realized how ill-prepared they were to identify and respond with appropriate supports for their students.[7] Without a systematic approach to RSSI assessment, chaplains may struggle to identify where climates are welcoming or exclusionary, pinpoint policy or structural barriers, and prioritize evidence-based improvements. Therefore, an RSSI-focused assessment is needed to generate actionable data that can guide institutional change, strengthen student support strategies, and equip religious and spiritual life staff with credible, data-driven metrics to inform advocacy, budgeting, and resource allocation.

---

[4] Culver, K. C., and Nicholas A. Bowman. "Are You Experienced?: How College Environments, Programs, and Interactions Shape Student Retention, Persistence, and Graduation." In *Improving College Student Retention*, pp. 153-181. Routledge, 2023.

[5] Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

[6] Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt. *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

[7] Mayhew, Matthew J, Benjamin Selznick, and Musbah Shaheen. "Addressing Campus Antisemitism Is A Now Or Never Moment For DEI." Forbes, December 21, 2023. https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewmayhew/2023/12/21/addressing-campus-antisemitism-is-a-now-or-never-moment-for-dei/; Haddad, H., Gill-Morris, A., Creamer, E., & Mayhew, M. (in press). INSPIRES: An Index for Reducing Institutional Polarization.

A Best Practice for Chaplains: The INSPIRES Index

To address this problem, we propose a best practice for chaplains to assess how welcoming a college campus is for students of different RSSIs: the Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Campus Climate Index (INSPIRES Index). Launched in 2021, INSPIRES is a free survey tool that went live in the 2021-2022 academic year as a collaborative effort between Drs. Matthew J. Mayhew (Ohio State University) and Alyssa N. Rockenbach (North Carolina State University).[8] The INSPIRES Team drew the criteria for each survey item from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS survey)[9], which examined what made students from over 120 campuses with diverse RSSIs feel at home on campus.

INSPIRES asks institutional representatives to complete one survey annually (see Figure 1). In return, they receive a comprehensive, data-driven scorecard that assesses their institutional efforts to create a welcoming campus climate for students across different RSSIs within the following seven domain areas: Religious Accommodations, Institutional Behaviors, Efforts to Reduce Negative Engagement, Extra-curricular Engagement, Space for Support and Expression, Institutional Structures, and Academic Engagement.

The types of questions asked in the INSPIRES survey have helped illuminate shortcomings and areas for growth across campus units. For example, among the over 300 institutions that completed INSPIRES between 2021 and 2024, only 20% of institutions offered specific training to address bias at the institutional level.[10] These numbers then skyrocketed to over 45% in the 2025 iteration of INSPIRES, whereby partner campuses updated their results, indicating improvement in this area. Thus, the coverage INSPIRES provides by assessing the campus environment as a whole, while considering discrete aspects such as training, can promote targeted changes that collectively make a significant impact across campus units.

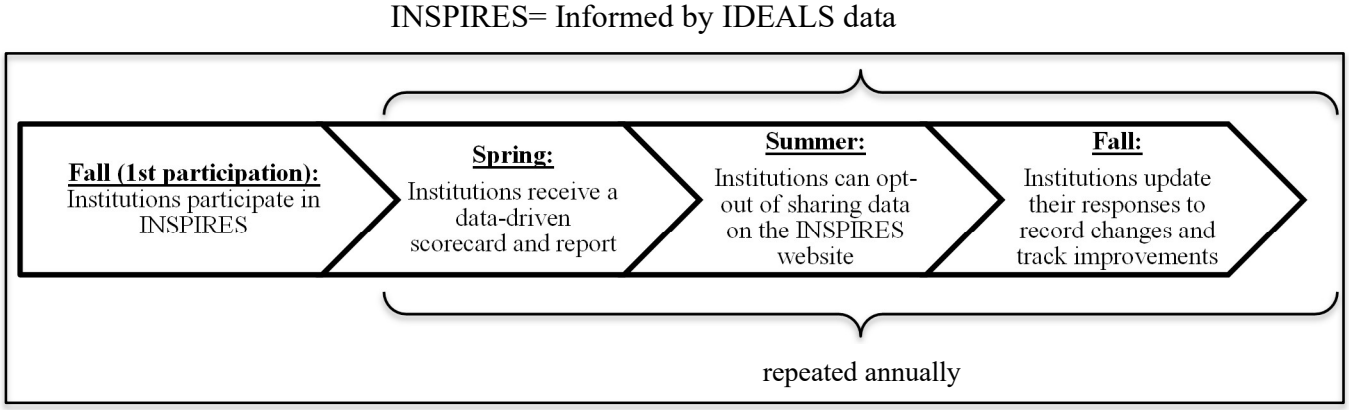

Figure 1: INSPIRES Participation Timeline

---

[8] Mayhew, Matthew J, Alyssa N Rockenbach, Musbah Shaheen, Christa Winkler, and Laura S Dahl. *INSPIRES Index Technical Report*. INSPIRES Index, 2025. https://www.inspiresindex.org/.

[9] IDEALS. Interfaith America, 2020. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/ideals/.

[10] Selznick, Benjamin S., Matthew J. Mayhew, Christa E. Winkler, Musbah Shaheen, and Alyssa N. Rockenbach. "Developing college students' Jewish appreciation: A four-year mixed-methods study." *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 6 (2024): 1177-1211.

Impact on Students and Chaplains

To illustrate the impact made on his campus from using the INSPIRES Index, Andrew Cirrilo, University Chaplain at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), shared: "[INSPIRES] acts as an instrument of collaborative energy between spirituality and religious life, student activities, counseling, access and belonging, and even segments of upper administration within each higher education institution. Overall, a lot can be learned and acted upon to effect positive change in levels of student belonging and comfort". As aforementioned, improvements in student belonging have broader benefits for their retention and graduation from the institution[11]. Thus, insights from RIT suggest that INSPIRES will help cultivate a more welcoming campus climate for students with diverse RSSIs, which could improve student belonging and attract more students who are more likely to persist in pursuing their degrees.

Furthermore, the direct changes resulting from INSPIRES participation were described by another university chaplain, who said that after completing the Index, "We made updates to the Office of the Chaplain website, such as publicizing the names of nearby halal/kosher restaurants." This change is particularly meaningful for students, since thoughtful improvements to dietary accommodations enable them to express their religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs positively and will allow them to eat with their friends of the same or different faith traditions.[12]

One additional chaplain shared that after completing the INSPIRES Index, their institution has worked to "fine-tune policies related to religious practice and expression and has included RSSI more holistically in other areas of campus". This testimony highlights the Index's broad reach in informing campus-wide changes.

By providing chaplains with a data driven INSPIRES scorecard, they are informed in a way that moves beyond anecdotes to identify the most pressing gaps that exist across campus units. This removes the guesswork when making targeted improvements, ensuring students are supported in ways that are necessary and important. Making carefully considered changes in this way removes the stress many institutions faced as they scrambled to support students with different RSSIs after October 7th, 2023.

Limitations

To support chaplains in making an informed decision about using the INSPIRES Index, we have considered several limitations. Firstly, the model and structure for participation in the Index are built on institutions updating their responses annually, which may be a limitation given the narrow time it leaves for institutions to implement changes between surveys. Thus, we propose to chaplains that they update as frequently as makes sense for their unique institutional needs and timelines. Secondly, because only one member of an institution is required to take the INSPIRES

---

[11] Mayhew, Matthew J., Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Nicholas A. Bowman, Tricia AD Seifert, and Gregory C. Wolniak. *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

[12] "Religious Accommodations and Policies on Campus (Examples)." Interfaith America. Accessed February 16, 2026. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/resources/religious-policies/; Karlin-Neumann, P., & Sanders, J. (2013). Bringing faith to campus: religious and spiritual space, time, and practice at Stanford University. *Journal of College and Character*, *14*(2), 125-132.

Index, there is a risk of incorrect reporting. Thus, we recommend that chaplains establish a stakeholder group to leverage shared expertise and complete the survey collectively. Finally, we appreciate that for assessment to be effective, the results must be linked to tangible changes in policy, practice, and resource allocation. However, this can be challenging amid growing budget constraints and limited resources at colleges nationwide. Therefore, we advocate that chaplains use the INSPIRES Index to identify the "low-hanging fruit" and the easiest changes to implement first, so the improvements do not feel overwhelming or financially impossible.

Takeaways and Questions to Ponder

There is a strong need for institutions to assess how welcoming their campus climates are for students with diverse RSSIs, to improve student outcomes, and identify persistent gaps across campus units. Since there is no alternative measurement tool that offers the insights provided by the INSPIRES Index, it holds an undeniable advantage as a current best practice in chaplaincy. Thus, moving forward, we urge chaplains to consider how they could benefit from an assessment tool focused on RSSI and to further explore implementing the INSPIRES Index on their campus.

Anisha Gill-Morris is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Program at The Ohio State University. Anisha is the lead graduate research associate for the INSPIRES Index project. Her research interests include religious worldview education, internationalization, and decolonizing practices.

Emily Creamer is the Research Director for the College Impact Laboratory and a lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University. Her research centers around equitable access into and throughout postsecondary education, which includes creating inclusive educational environments for all worldviews.

Matthew J. Mayhew is the William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration with a focus on Higher Education and Student Affairs at The Ohio State University. He is widely recognized for research on how interfaith engagement and campus climate shape student learning and belonging across diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

Spaces for the Mystical: A Reflective Essay

Preeta M. Banerjee
Associate Director for Spiritual Life
Babson College

Abstract: *This reflective essay explores the tension between rationalism and mysticism in spiritual care, focusing on the Enlightenment and its impact. Drawing on Hindu traditions, evolutionary cosmology, and personal experience, it explores reclaiming mystical ways of knowing—intuition, embodied wisdom, and direct encounter with the Divine to better honor and respect those seeking spiritual care because of mystical experiences. By honoring multidimensional spirituality, validating non-linear journeys, and creating supportive spaces, the essay envisions holistic care that integrates science and mysticism, affirming mystery as essential to human flourishing.*

Keywords: *mysticism, enlightenment, evolutionary cosmology, embodied wisdom, direct encounter*

I came to this essay reflecting on my own personal experience including over six years of experience providing spiritual care in academic settings. I have been observing for the past year that the way we offer contemporary care has been shaped by historical moments and dominant narratives of what counts as "Truth." One such moment was the Enlightenment, when reason, science, and rationality became guiding lights of Western civilization. These principles have brought extraordinary progress in scientific discovery, medicine, and technology. These principles also have carried a shadow.[1] In the rush to elevate logic and evidence, other ways of knowing have been pushed aside. The mystical – which I define by direct experience of the Divine, heightened intuition, and embodied wisdom - became suspect, relegated to superstition or dismissed as irrational in ways that continue to show up today.[2]

The tension between rationalism and mysticism is not just a philosophical debate for me. I have seen it structure the decision to honor the dreamer. It shapes how we care for hearts and souls, how we listen to those who encounter the Divine in ways that cannot be measured or replicated. It structures whether we respect the spiritual care seeker who meets ancestors in visions, or whether we diagnose them as disordered or disoriented. It identifies whether we see mystics as bearers of wisdom, or as anomalies to be corrected.

In this reflective essay, I want to expand our thinking beyond this tension, drawing upon my own journey of decolonizing my practice of Hinduism and recent engagement with evolutionary cosmology – the view that the universe itself develops through natural, gradual, and

---

[1] Stephen Gaukroger, "The Enlightenment Revolt Against Rationalism," *The Australian Review of Public Affairs*, November 2005, http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2005/11/gaukroger.html.
[2] Dean Radin, *Real Magic: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science, and a Guide to the Secret Power of the Universe* (New York: Harmony Books, 2018).

transformative processes analogous to biological evolution.[3] I'd like us to imagine together how we might reclaim spaces for the mystical in our own time. This is not just about Hinduism, nor just about history.[4] It is about the multidimensionality of humanity, and the possibility of expanding spiritual care to honor those whose lives are touched by mystery beyond the rational.

Learning from Early Emissaries of the Mystical to the West

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two teachers of Hinduism—Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Yogananda, a disciple of Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri—came to the West to share the wisdom of their traditions. For me and other students of their schools of thought, their mission was not to argue against science, but to share the mystical heart of Hinduism. They spoke of meditation, of union with the Divine, of enlightenment as embodied experience, within frameworks of science, i.e. the "Science of Yoga".

They were emissaries of a tradition that integrates rational thought and mystical insight. They reminded the West that faith is not only about doctrines but about direct encounter, and science could be applied to the exploration of the inner world. Their presence was a counter-narrative to the Enlightenment's reductionism, a reminder that human beings are more than minds, they are bodies, spirits, hearts.

And yet, from the time when the British occupied India to the time when Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda came to the West,[5] Hinduism was intellectually reshaped to be integrated into Western hierarchies. Mysticism, with its emphasis on direct experience of the Divine, was often marginalized. Rationalism that demanded evidence, reproducibility, and universal laws, was prioritized. Mysticism offered intuition, personal encounter, and ineffable union. The two were cast as opposites: rationalism as serious, mysticism as suspect.

I have found this dichotomy false in my own life. Mysticism is not the enemy of reason. It is emergent, holistic, and deeply prophetic, and it can embrace rational inquiry as part of its quest for unity. Mystical knowledge is not irrational—it is trans-rational.[6] It moves beyond the limits

---

[3] Evolutionary cosmology is my preferred term to refer a web of related concepts from philosophy, physics, metaphysics, systems theory, and consciousness studies. There isn't a single canonical list, but there are other recognizable terms that scholars, theorists, and practitioners tend to use when referencing this phenomenon, including but not limited to: Noetics, cosmic, transpersonal or unitive consciousness, quantum entanglement, Akashic field, and Noosphere.

[4] As this is a reflective essay, I write from the personal, yet I want to acknowledge that there are many traditions that celebrate and practice the intuitive, mysterious, embodied, contemplative direct experience of the sacred but many not name themselves of their traditions as mystical, given scholarly and/or popular definitional barriers to claiming the term(s).

[5] Deepak Lal, *The Hindu Equilibrium: India c.1500 B.C.–2000 A.D.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Sandeep Banerjee, "British Colonialism and Imperialism: Hinduism," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/.

[6] By trans-rational, I refer to modes of knowing or awareness that go beyond ordinary rational thought without rejecting it, thus integrating intuition, insight, and higher-order meaning rather than falling below reason into the irrational.

of logic without discarding its value. As thinkers like John Horgan have suggested, mystical experiences can yield insights that complement, even transcend, what science discovers.[7]

The tragedy, for me, in providing contemporary care is that by privileging rationalism, we risk losing balance and nuance. Truth is not only deduced but also revealed; not only proven but also experienced. The legacy of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda, among others, invites us to ask: how might we, today, reclaim the mystical dimensions of faith in contemporary care? How might we expand spiritual care to honor those whose experiences defy linear progression, whose journeys unfold like blooming lotuses rather than straight lines?

The Contemporary Need of Spaces for Care of Mystics

In chaplaincy, therapy, coaching, and spiritual direction, we often rely on models shaped by rationalism. We turn to frameworks to diagnose, categorize, and measure. We often look for progress that can be charted. But what happens when someone's experience does not fit the chart?

Consider the person who dreams of ancestors and feels their guidance. In a rationalist frame, this might be labeled psychosis. But in a mystical frame, it is communion. Consider the seeker who experiences ego death in meditation. Rationalism might call it suicidal ideation. Mysticism calls it transformation.

If we only use rationalist models, we risk misinterpreting, even harming, those whose experiences are mystical. We need frameworks that honor the multidimensionality of human spirituality. We need care that validates experience, not just progress. We need spaces where mystics are not pathologized but welcomed.

One promising framework is evolutionary cosmology. Thinkers like Thomas Berry, Ilia Delio, Brian Swimme, and Beatrice Bruteau have woven together science and spirituality into a vision of the universe as dynamic, interconnected, and infused with Divine presence.[8] Drawing on concepts from Hinduism to articulate a cosmology where all things are in communion, they speak of a universe evolving toward greater consciousness.[9]

Evolutionary cosmology, for me, dissolves the false dichotomy - it does not pit rationalism against mysticism. It integrates them. It says: yes, science reveals laws and processes, and mysticism reveals meaning and connection. Together, they offer a holistic vision.

In terms of moving towards best practices for spiritual care, this can mean we support mystics not by dismissing their experiences, but by situating them within a larger story of cosmic communion. It suggests that we can help people see their personal growth as part of the

---

[7] John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

[8] Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

[9] Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

evolution of collective consciousness. It offers that we can cultivate awe, reverence, and compassion as central to healing.

How, then, might we practically create spaces for the spiritual care of mystics? Four insights emerge from my studies and experience:

1. Reclaim ways of knowing beyond rational thought.

Mystics often live from the heart rather than the mind. They find truth in beauty, creativity, laughter, love. Spiritual care can be called to honor these ways of knowing. It can celebrate inspiration, kindness, peace, and move us beyond analysis and the written word.

2. Validate experience over linear progress.

Mystical journeys are not straight lines. They unfold like lotuses, layer by layer. Our methods of providing spiritual care can more intentionally respect the unfolding of these mystical journeys. Personalized guidance, mentorship, contemplative practices, all can support the unique paths of mystics.[10]

3. Embrace holistic interfaith community.

Mystics can draw from multiple traditions. Spiritual care can be called to be integrative, honoring diverse influences and addressing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs. Practices like yoga, energy healing, mindfulness, and community sharing can provide support honoring individuality. The concept of emergence does not ignore components, it just doesn't reduce itself to those components, instead honoring that the sum of parts can be synergistic and more.

4. Invest in resources and sacred spaces.

Mystics can benefit from access to texts, teachings, techniques, and sanctuaries as much as anyone. They are often highly sensitive and deeply affected by their surroundings. Providing spaces of safety and solitude is essential. Spaces of sanctuary are important for spiritual development.[11]

Conclusion

What does all this mean for us, here and now? I respond to two main questions you might be holding to conclude this reflective essay.

First, how am I acknowledging that we live in a world saturated with technology, where even spirituality is sometimes mediated by devices—apps, wearables, brain stimulation?[12] These tools can be helpful, but alone they risk turning the journey into an experiment. Mysticism reminds us

---

[10] B. S. Naschak, *The Global Mystical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023).
[11] Preeta Banerjee, Sheron Fraser-Burgess, and Anya Phillips Thomas, "Beyond Resistance: Building, Making and Creating Sanctuary," *Journal of Interreligious Studies 39* (2023).
[12] Wesley J. Wildman and Kate J. Stockly, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021).

that faith is participatory. It is not controlled but we surrender to it.[13] It is not engineered but encountered.

Second, how am I building on the history of the Enlightenment that gave us a particular type of reason, but it also gave us a bias against mystery? While maybe not giving us answers, expansion of our spiritual care methods can honor and respect those whose experiences defy categories. We can integrate evolutionary cosmology to see ourselves as part of a sacred, evolving universe. We can create spaces of sanctuary, guidance, community, and beauty. To reclaim the mystical is to reclaim our humanity. It is to remember that we are not only thinkers but feelers, not only analyzers but lovers, not only rational but relational. It is to remember that the Divine is not only proven but experienced.[14]

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D. serves in Babson College's Office of Belonging and Inclusion as Associate Director for Spiritual Life. She draws on over 25 years of experience as a business school professor, corporate executive, life coach and higher education chaplain to bring together spirituality, community, innovation and entrepreneurship. Her practice is rooted in bhakti, gyan, raj and karma yoga.

[13] Pravina Rodrigues, *A Śākta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024)..

[14]Preeta M. Banerjee, "Being Experienced by and Experiencing the Divine: An Interplay of Womanist and Shakta Traditions," *Journal of Interreligious Studies 41* (2024): 62–70.

Book Review:

Theology without walls: Founding essays. *Denny, Christopher, and Rita D. Sherma, eds. Doylestown, PA: Caladium Publishing Company, LLC, 2025.*

Elizabeth Hakken Candido
College Chaplain & Director of Religious and Spiritual Life
Kalamazoo College

Abstract: The second book in the Theology Without Walls series, this volume traces the last decade of developments in a conversation that seeks to generate wisdom across religious traditions. Theology with walls seeks to be a "cooperative, constructive, transreligious theological project" generating new knowledge and new understandings of extant knowledge in the field. Divided into three sections, the book lays out the conceptual groundwork for TWW through a series of short essays by a variety of theologians. Chaplains who engage in multifaith or interfaith programming may find answers and thought partners for the many questions that arise from deep engagement with traditions that are not one's own.

Keywords: *theology without walls, philosophical theology, transreligious, interfaith, theology*

Founding Essays, the second in the 'Theology Without Walls' series, continues the intention of being a "cooperative, constructive, transreligious theological project" generating new knowledge and new understandings of extant knowledge in the field. (Denny and Sherma 2025, 2) Philosopher Jerry Martin, who initiated the project, states in his opening essay, "If the aim of theology is to understand ultimate reality as fully as possible and if evidence about, and insight into, that reality is not limited to a single tradition, what is needed then is a theology without confessional boundaries, a 'theology without walls.'" (Martin 2025, 12) This volume traces the last decade of developments in the theology without walls (TWW). The collected essays explore what can be known if our sources are not structured by the limits of particular religions. Can we gain transreligious knowledge when the traditions themselves ask different questions, presuppose different cosmologies, and use wildly differing hermeneutics?

Divided into three sections, the book lays out the conceptual groundwork for TWW through a series of short essays by a variety of theologians. The initial section, "On the Concept of Theology without Walls More Broadly," takes on the epistemological challenges of doing transreligious theology. The authors come to varying conclusions about the plausibility of the project while affirming the necessity and usefulness of trying. The second section, "Pluralism/Transreligious Theology –Possible and Inevitable," seeks to map the conceptual and rhetorical space for doing theology in this way. And the final section, "On Issues of Belonging/Affiliation," explores religious identity in light of a TWW orientation. These essays examine the meaning of "belonging" when the subject claims more than one religious tradition as "home." Throughout all three sections of the book, authors return time and again to map out where TWW overlaps with comparative theology and interfaith engagement and where TWW expands beyond those categories.

The book is a lively thought companion to many of the questions that arise in the work of a multifaith chaplain. While written in the formal language of academic theology, the authors raise questions that sound familiar to any on-campus interfaith group: Can I learn about God from another's tradition? If I pull from multiple sources, am I creating a new religion? When does learning become cultural appropriation? How do we build upon common ethical or moral foundations when we can't even agree on the existence of an Ultimate Reality? Can I believe beyond the limits of my tradition, and if I do so, am I becoming someone or something different?

One perspective not yet included in this volume is that of those who generate knowledge from outside religious traditions. As I read, I wondered at the absence of non-religious or secular knowledge descriptions of transcendent experience and what that perspective might offer to this project. Although hinted at in Rory McEntee's essay, "Interspiritual Theology as a Radical Potential for New Vistas in Theological Thought" and a second short note in the "Afterword," the TWW movement has not yet found a way to integrate the wisdom of the Nones.

Whether or not you ultimately buy into the project of TWW, this book will push your thinking and offer clear articulations of the often-muddy arguments that surround these deep conversations. Standout essays by Peter Feldmeier, S.Mark Heim, Hans Gustafson, and Joyce Ann Konigsburg trace the limits, resources, and future orientation of the TWW project. The final "Afterword," by editor Christopher Denny responds to some of the big objections to the project, including whether TWW seeks to generate a new normative description of Ultimate Reality. I recommend the book for anyone seeking deep engagement with the promise and limitations of generating transreligious wisdom in the practice of higher education chaplaincy.

Elizabeth Hakken Candido is the College Chaplain and Director of Religious and Spiritual Life at Kalamazoo College, in Kalamazoo, MI. Her essays and short stories have appeared in a variety of publications including Sojourners, Land Beyond Magazine, and Presbyterian Outlook.

Book Review:

With the best of intentions: Interreligious missteps and mistakes. Mosher, Lucinda, Elinor Pierce and Or N. Rose, eds. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023.

Chris RayAlexander
Chaplain
Woodward Academy

Abstract: *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes presents a wealth of perspectives on the perils and promises of interfaith relationship building. Ranging from fundamental methodological insights to vulnerable retellings of personal mishaps, this volume aims to catalyze conversation by reframing interreligious errors as opportunities for growth and the creation of more resilient interfaith (and intrafaith) relationships, communities, and collaborations.*

Keywords: *interfaith literacy, interreligious, difference, identity, discomfort*

One could be forgiven for mistaking *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes* for something it is not. This is not a guide to common interfaith mistakes. As contributor Jennifer Howe Peace intimates, the creation of such "a simple guide to interfaith or intrafaith engagement" would jeopardize the more urgent task of engaging with the "nuances of our relative positions as we sort through our relationships to one another and to our diverse philosophical and religious perspectives" ("Breaking Bread,"130). Instead, this volume opts for something that is ultimately of greater worth: a wide-ranging selection of 41 voices that disagree, err, fail, flourish, and together forward a conversation worthy of continuing beyond the printed page.

The book follows a trajectory that many readers may recognize from their own interfaith journeys. Moving from the challenges of initial encounters to the vicissitudes of conversations shaped by values (often glaringly visible) and power (frequently invisible). Part I, "First Impressions," begins with a reminder that sometimes our desire to embrace difference can lead to overthinking and mistaken presumptions about those we wish to welcome. This is followed by reflections on the multiple dimensions of meaning housed within our labels and the difficulties that are often implicit in attempts to name ourselves within a fraught landscape of proliferating, partial identities. While these authors take seriously the need to ask for permission and seek understanding, they also encourage us to consider when misunderstandings should be corrected, the best ways of doing so, and the necessity of creating spaces for groups and individuals to discern their own boundaries.

Part II, "Presumptions," scrutinizes other essential questions, including—but not limited to—what role (if any) might prayer play in interfaith gatherings: how might we navigate boundaries obscured by everyday language and what should be done when parts of our interfaith paradigm exclude erstwhile allies? A common theme emerges; how can we learn to deal with difference

differently, and what languages, worldviews, and histories can or should inform that learning process? As Part III, "Conversations," makes clear, taking that process seriously requires an interrogation of economic, racial, ethnic, cultural, and vocational presuppositions. Speaking as religious leaders, educators, and caregivers, these authors share moments of intense personal growth fueled by difficult and demanding interpersonal encounters that underscore the uncertainties of interfaith (and intrafaith) engagement. In so doing, they also remind us that, beyond creeds, practices, and traditions, the foundation of interfaith work is and must be relational.

This emphasis on the pitfalls and promise of interfaith relationship building decisively shapes the concluding sections of *With the Best of Intentions*. Part IV examines approaches to navigating between "Competing Values" with contributions that rethink appreciation (as opposed to syncretism and appropriation), extol the necessity of adaptability in interfaith dialogue, and elevate the civic dimension as a space of potential commonality. This culminates with consideration of boundary creation, how the visibility of those boundaries is conditioned by subjectivities, group affiliations and identity markers, and how traversing and trespassing them can be a profound source of growth and grace for others. This exploration of boundary maintenance sets the table for a deliberate reckoning with power, those who wield or lack it, and how its influence can both determine and overdetermine opportunities for interfaith collaboration. Part V, "Power Dynamics," addresses this situation head-on through a powerful combination of anecdotes and analyses that lay bare forces and sources of invisibility, including brute paternalism and othering, normalized discrimination, and more subtle forms of aggression, displacement, and marginalization. While exposing the manifold impacts of power, the authors reveal openings for resistance within hegemonic structures. The work closes by sounding cautious notes of hope as the authors illuminate newly-emerging avenues for overcoming or circumventing some of the most common dead ends of interfaith relations.

Resonating with the words of contributor Jaxon Washburn, this rich resource enacts some of the greatest benefits of interfaith experiences by providing "invaluable tools with broad usefulness [relating] to communication, active listening, conflict resolution, peacemaking, and reciprocity" ("Coexistence Wasn't Good Enough," 143), all of which will be useful for chaplains, clerics and other religious leaders, educators, and activists in the burgeoning worlds of interfaith and intrafaith exploration. Replete with divergent perspectives, *With the Best of Intentions* shares both the strengths and weaknesses of any truly diverse conversation: some voices might clash with our sensibilities and expectations, just as others might lend language to what was previously an amorphous anxiety or unarticulated desire. Nevertheless, the voices gathered here are united in extending an invitation to continue contemplating, complicating, and contributing to the conversation convened therein.

After two decades teaching Spanish, literature, and philosophy in higher education, Rev. Dr. Chris RayAlexander now serves as Chaplain & Chair of Religious Studies at Woodward Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and Minister for Interfaith Engagement at First Congregational Church of Atlanta, UCC.

UNFOLDING:
UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE

ISSUE 3
FEBRUARY 2026

Contributors

Erica Adarkwa

Erica Adarkwa is the Assistant Director of Restorative Practices at Yale University. Erica is a dedicated student of Black feminist practice and is passionate about building and contributing to visions of care that center our wholeness and dignity. Prior to joining Restorative Practices, she served as an Assistant Chaplain at Yale and supported students across the university as they made connections between their values and practice. She is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School and Brown University.

Shola Adegbite

Shola is the Assistant Dean of Spiritual and Religious Life at Lawrence University in Appleton Wisconsin. She is passionate about helping people live wholesome lives by encouraging them to see the sacredness in their rest. She loves movement as a practice in liberation.

Nathan Albert

Rev. Dr. Nathan Albert serves as the University Chaplain and Assistant Vice President for Belonging at the University of Lynchburg. He holds a BFA in Musical Theatre Performance, a Master of Divinity, a Certificate in Spiritual Transformation, and a Doctor of Ministry in Interreligious Chaplaincy focusing his research on the ways in which chaplains in higher education can disrupt Christian hegemony.

Preeta Banerjee

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D. serves in Babson College's Office of Belonging and Inclusion as Associate Director for Spiritual Life. She draws on over 25 years of experience as a business school professor, corporate executive, life coach and higher education chaplain to bring together spirituality, community, innovation and entrepreneurship. Her practice is rooted in bhakti, gyan, raj and karma yoga.

Daniel Bell

The Reverend Daniel Bell is an Episcopal priest who has served for nearly a decade in higher education

chaplaincy and parish settings. He is the Protestant Chaplain at Tufts University, the Affiliate Campus Minister for the Episcopal Community at Boston College, and the Priest Associate at the Church of the Redeemer in Chestnut Hill, MA. Dan is an active member of the Association for Chaplaincy and Spiritual Life in Higher Education. He is passionate about ecumenical and interfaith relationship-building within and across traditions.

H. Eduardo Bousson

H. Eduardo Bousson is an elder in full connection in the United Methodist Church (UMC). Originally from Puerto Rico, he is the senior manager for Collegiate Ministries at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the UMC. Previously, he served for 10 years as the university minister at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

Elizabeth Hakken Candido

Elizabeth Hakken Candido is an ordained Presbyterian (USA) Pastor who has spent her career working in interfaith and multi-faith landscapes. She serves as College Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, MI. An essayist and fiction writer, Liz's work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sojourners, Presbyterian Outlook, and Psychology Today.

Emily Creamer

Emily Creamer is the Research Director for the College Impact Laboratory and a lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at The Ohio State University. Her research centers around equitable access into and throughout postsecondary education, which includes creating inclusive educational environments for all worldviews.

Alex Miller-Knaack

Alex Miller-Knaack brings a deep commitment to helping student in higher education, drawing on her experience in student support and chaplaincy. Her work reflects a passion for fostering inclusive, thoughtful dialogue on the evolving role of student support, including chaplaincy, in academic settings.

Kaleb Loomis

Kaleb Loomis is the Associate Chaplain at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. He designs and leads strategic programs and initiatives that help students explore their identities, connect with others, and live out their values.

Linda Morgan-Clement

Linda Morgan-Clement is a retired Presbyterian Minister who spent much of her active ministry creating chaplaincy offices at two liberal arts schools and coordinating programs supported by endowments, including the Lilly Endowment and Mellon foundation. Linda is also a writer and public speaker.

Catherine Gillespie

After 17 years as a professor of Child Development and Early Childhood Education, Dr. Catherine Gillespie

moved into an administrative role in higher education for 12 years, during which time she became a spiritual director. These experiences led her to desire to combine her two vocations and is now she in her first year as the Director of Spiritual and Religious Life at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT.

Anisha Gill-Morris

Anisha Gill-Morris is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Program at The Ohio State University. Anisha is the lead graduate research associate for the INSPIRES Index project. Her research interests include religious worldview education, internationalization, and decolonizing practices.

Matthew J. Mayhew

Matthew J. Mayhew is the William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration with a focus on Higher Education and Student Affairs at The Ohio State University. He is widely recognized for research on how interfaith engagement and campus climate shape student learning and belonging across diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

Aziel Nuñez

Aziel Nuñez serves as Director of The Compass Center at Butler University, the campus hub for spiritual life and the center for meaning, purpose, and spiritual life. He is a lecturer at Christian Theological Seminary and a research assistant with the Rooted in Spirit project at the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis. His work focuses on agency centered design, interfaith engagement, and on the formation of students and communities across diverse traditions.

Jenny Peek

Rev. Jenny Peek is the Co-Pastor of the University Church in Yale and Associate University Chaplain. She has served in the Yale University Chaplain's Office since 2017. She comes to the Chaplain's Office after receiving a Master of Divinity with certificates in Educational Leadership Ministry and Reformed Studies from Yale Divinity School. Jenny is ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Chris RayAlexander

After two decades teaching Spanish, literature, and philosophy in higher education, Rev. Dr. Chris RayAlexander now serves as Chaplain & Chair of Religious Studies at Woodward Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and Minister for Interfaith Engagement at First Congregational Church of Atlanta, UCC.