

Religious Diversity at the University of Michigan



Faculty Communities for Inclusive Teaching, 2015

Project Overview

Key goal was to explore the landscape of religious diversity at UM: especially how religious diversity plays out in the teaching and learning context not just within religion-based courses, but even in courses focused on topics that do not seem obviously related to religion (food, for example).

This includes an understanding of religion / “being religious” that is broad and inclusive (including agnostic, atheist, secular, etc.).

Events included:

- 1 meeting with faculty in March
- 2 (identical) events inviting students and faculty to come together in March and April

Participants

Faculty were invited and asked to suggest other faculty and students who they thought might be interested; 30–40 faculty members were invited, and ~15 attended at least one of the three meetings. Students from the faculty’s own circle/classes and student groups were invited to attend the events in March and April. Flyers were also used to advertise. Students wanted to hear more from faculty about where they are coming from, as well as vice versa.



Key Insights / New Questions

There is a lot more intellectual diversity here than many faculty realize, much of it rooted in religious convictions and worldviews that depart from the “secular norm” (among both faculty and students). Faculty expressed a sense that we often forget that religious diversity is an asset and not a liability.

Religious conviction, identity, and practice become salient for students and faculty in a far wider variety of classroom situations than one might realize. We heard about everything from sociology to history to engineering to political science to biology.

Religion means many things: community, politics, beliefs, spirituality. Different aspects of religion are salient for students and faculty in different contexts.

For faculty, talking about religion in the classroom seemed to be threatening, but of great interest. Faculty who deal routinely with religious topics (such as those who teach history of religion) are often much more comfortable than those who do not.

It seems that every group has a sense of being “in the minority” and being looked down upon, disliked, or marginalized by others: atheists, secular humanists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, ... and they may all be correct, at least part of the time. Students expressed these concerns less than faculty.

With religion as with many other things, we often practice “harmony by subtraction” – avoid saying certain things and bringing up certain topics so as to make sure that no one will be offended. Carried to an extreme, though, this seems to have produced a sense among many faculty and students that there is a lot we can’t say about religion and/or politics at this university, for fear of kneejerk offense and censorship. Everyone in our groups found it valuable and refreshing to have a “safe space” to talk about this, and we had a general sense that the university should be a place where big issues are on the table for respectful discussion more than they are now.

Religion for students is “diverse, personal, and important” (student quote).

The question that many of us seem to be navigating is how, as faculty, we can empower ourselves and our students to speak in an academically professional way without checking our deepest convictions at the door.

Suggested Classroom Strategies

Set clear expectations and goals for class discussions, providing structure to create an atmosphere of respect and engagement rather than threat and avoidance, which may be the default in many settings.

Engage students in using their imagination – imagine your way into a perspective, then imagine your way into its opposite. Students who have experienced this spoke highly of it as a tool for learning and a framework for discussion.

Assume that people are exploring their values and beliefs rather than being perfectly fixed in them – hold and honor an attitude of exploration. Engage in important conversations, always with clear guidelines as to how to do so respectfully.

For any given statement you could make about religious belief or practice, past or present, assume that at least one person in the room will disagree with you. Do not take it for granted that “everyone knows” or “everyone agrees” on *anything*. Don’t assume anything about anybody’s beliefs, even if they have labeled themselves as part of a certain group or as holding a certain belief. Give them space to share exactly what it means to them.

Be prepared for the small handful of students who will actively rant or disrupt the classroom atmosphere when a religious topic comes up. These students may come from absolutely any background – just because a student considers themselves “not religious” doesn’t mean that they won’t have strong opinions about any given religion-related topic. These can be teachable moments if approached as such.

Resources

Faculty questionnaire, student questionnaire, and supplementary questions available upon request.

Discussion guidelines included the following:

1. Conversations about religion can be awkward and difficult, but this is just meant to be a beginning and a starting point.
2. What is said here, stays here: While we can’t make guarantees, we expect everyone to keep what is said confidential.
3. What is learned here, leaves here: Please adopt an attitude of wanting to learn from one another’s experiences, and take that learning with you when you leave.
4. Be respectful, but have difficult conversations: this should be both a safe space and a challenging space. Tips for being respectful:
 - a) When you speak, speak from your experience. Try not to speak broadly about “all Christians” or “all Muslims”; use “in my experience” or “from my perspective.”
 - b) Give the benefit of the doubt. Assume the best of others. This event may be challenging, but it should be constructive, not destructive. If you find something offensive, please do not hesitate to point it out, but be forgiving.
 - c) Most importantly, listen. Take turns speaking. Faculty are paid to talk, but our job today is also to listen, and to ask good follow-up questions.

Next Steps

Keep open / provide opportunities for discussion and dialogue, recognizing that even (perhaps especially) on a small scale, these conversations have value

Gain more perspective(s) from students; include more student voices

Engage with religion as a benefit and not as a threat

Possibly send survey / questionnaire out to larger groups of people