WELCOME! We are so glad that you are here with us: opening the first pages of Convergence Magazine. As you do so, you culminate several months of work to bring this publication out of the minds of our editors and authors and onto the screens of our readers. Coming from an organization based on the grand vision of convergences, intersections, and dialogues, this new relationship between us and you adds yet another level of collaboration. This is due to the fact that we see you as more than passive receivers of content, but also as partners in the continued generation of knowledge and inspiration around religious, secular, and spiritual identities in higher education.

Convergence Magazine is focused on two specific areas of this identity work, ones that have yet to be fully explored within higher education journals. These are the two areas of convergence upon which our organization stands: 1) the convergence between religious, secular, and spiritual identities on college campuses, and 2) the convergence between administrators and faculty members in all levels of higher education and religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals (including campus ministry). The magazine’s objective is to promote harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens by spreading understanding among those who espouse a wide range of identities and worldviews.

Convergence Magazine is meant to be a practical tool, one that will offer specific knowledge and skills that will enable administrators, faculty members, and other professionals to better serve the students on their campuses.

To that end, this first issue contains articles in several of our target content areas. In the Opinion section, Managing Editor Dr. Jenny Small and Dr. Peter Laurence raise the critical question of the language we use when speaking and writing on issues related to religious, secular, and spiritual diversity. In the Promising Practices section, Dr. Joe Pritchett writes about a very personal convergence between the fields of student affairs and religious life, after he moved from a career in residence life to one as Director for Faith and Meaning at Franklin and Marshall College. Also in that section, Dr. Jeanine Diller of the University of Toledo interviews a student about their joint experience creating a celebration of the Hindu holiday Holi.

In addition, we welcome your contributions to this work. First, all readers are invited to join a free webinar with Jenny Small and Peter Laurence about their article. The webinar will be held on April 25th at 1:00 EDT. Click here to register. We welcome your reactions and questions to any of the pieces in this issue on our Facebook page. We have also included various thoughtful questions and prompts throughout these pages for your reflection. Finally, we ask you to consider submitting an article for publication in the magazine. See the Call for Submissions at the end of the issue for more information.

On behalf of ourselves, our fellow editors, and the entire Convergence team, we hope you enjoy the inaugural issue of Convergence Magazine.
The Vocabulary of Our Work

By Jenny L. Small and Peter Laurence, Convergence Board of Directors

SPRITUAL. RELIGIOUS. SECULAR. ATHEIST. AGNOSTIC. SPIRITUAL, BUT NOT RELIGIOUS.

Toss out almost any religious or philosophic term to a diverse discussion group and ask them what it means, and the chances of getting consensus are slim. Yet we use these terms in our communications and often assume that people will understand what we mean by them. By doing this, we risk miscommunicating the intentions of our work and failing to build our movement upon shared values and purposes.

Convergence is breaking new ground, and we feel that it’s important to define our terms so that we can communicate effectively. We offer these definitions with the understanding that no one definition is authoritative, but that these provide us with a common ground for communication. Although the two of us writing this piece do not speak for the entire organization, we believe we are well-situated to get the conversation started.

Let’s start with our organization’s purpose statement:

The purpose of Convergence is to enhance college and university campus climates for religious, secular, and spiritual identities through policy and practice. Convergence focuses on building the professionalism of the field where those working at the intersections of religious, secular, and spiritual identities take direct responsibility for supporting a campus wide conversation and policy shift for the benefit of all. Our work empowers campus professionals to work towards a future of diversity work that removes stigmas, opens communications, and fully incorporates religious, secular, and spiritual identities into both higher education administration and religious life. (Convergence, 2017)

Identity:
For purposes of this project, identity is defined as a person’s designation of a particular set of social conventions that determine their worldview within the realms of religion, spirituality, and secularism. Religious conventions include the major religious traditions and the subgroups within those traditions, as well as more recent religious expressions. Spiritual conventions include a wide array of beliefs and practices not associated with a religious tradition, such as “spiritual but not religious,” “New Age,” etc. Secular conventions can include atheism, agnosticism, secular humanism, etc. Not all identities are the result of choice. Religious, spiritual, and secular identities may be received from one’s parents without any critical examination, and certainly the cultural components of religion are often born into, rather than chosen.

Worldview:
A worldview is a set of understandings that provide the lens through which individuals view reality. One’s worldview can be derived from a variety of sources and is based on a set of beliefs that stem from those sources. Traditional religious sources provide a ready-made set of beliefs, although individuals who identify with a particular tradition may not accept all of its established doctrines. Spirituality provides a perspective that is based on a more personal and intuitive sense of being in the world. Secularism is often grounded in a rational, scientific view of reality that relies strongly on the findings of science, understandings of the natural world, and the accumulated knowledge of human history.

Meaning-making:
Meaning-making is the attempt to understand reality through a religious, spiritual, or secular lens. Science provides facts through observation and experimentation. Out of those facts grow theories to explain how what has been observed might be part of a comprehensive and comprehensible whole. In other words, to grasp the meaning of what is observed. The scientific method is a widely accepted practice for expanding human knowledge. In contrast to science, religion and spirituality rely on a sense of reality that goes beyond the material, observable world to provide a larger context for meaning-making. There is much more ambiguity about religious and spiritual realizations than about scientific discovery, resulting in a broadly diverse environment of religious and spiritual belief systems. In addition, secular individuals also often experience a sense of wonder, awe, and discovery when considering humanity’s place in the cosmos. All three sources of meaning, however, exert a powerful influence on the worldviews of the individuals who identify with them.
Note: The boundaries of the following three groups are not rigid and are open to valuable discussion. The following descriptions are attempts to define their essence.

**Religious:**
People whose understanding of reality is influenced by a particular religious tradition are considered to be religious. There are several religious traditions that are long-standing and have attracted large numbers of adherents, and there is also a wide variety of smaller, more recent religious affiliations that have just as significant an influence on those who identify with them. Awareness of an individual's religious orientation is a vital component of achieving an understanding of their worldview. Because religious traditions are not homogeneous, an individual's relationship with a particular tradition must be examined before making any assumptions about that person's belief system.

**Spiritual:**
This category includes people whose understanding of spiritual reality is not defined by a single or, in many cases, any religious tradition, but is rather generated by a sense of direct connection to something sacred or greater than oneself. That sense is often described as an inner experience rather than an outward observation. It tends to result in an expanded feeling of connection to everything and everyone as part of a comprehensive whole, not as a result of scientific discovery, but as an intuitive understanding. A sense of connection to the spiritual can result from a variety of occurrences, ranging from an inspiring moment to a life-changing event.

**Secular:**
We use “secular” here in contrast with “sacred.” The secular viewpoint involves those people who feel that there is either no such thing as a spiritual reality, or god(s), or who just don't feel certain whether or not these things exist. Within the secular viewpoint, atheism is the absence of a belief in any supernatural reality, whereas agnosticism is the absence of any knowledge of the supernatural. Humanism is reliance on the human mind as the source of discernment as opposed to spiritual influence, and on science as the process through which the mind acquires understanding. Humanism focuses on enriching lives in the here and now, for every person. Secularism has sometimes been a reaction against the perceived abuses of religious dogmatism and authority.

**Convergence:**
Convergence refers to the coming together of individuals with different identities in an attempt to knit together their diverse orientations and understandings into a harmonious community. Historically, human society has had a tendency to separate into tribes based on geography, political divisions, or philosophical and religious differences. Members of one tribe characteristically lack an understanding of people from another tribe. This has often led to mistrust, hostility, and even violent encounters. Overcoming misunderstanding is a primary function of convergence, but beyond that, an infrastructure is required that is conducive to providing an environment of positive relationships and productive functionality among those of different identities. In the particular case of the Convergence organization, the focus is on convergences between people of varied religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

**Unity:**
It’s important when speaking about convergence to differentiate between the concepts of unity and uniformity. We’ve defined convergence as the coming together of people with diverse orientations and understandings. In unity, that diversity is not lost, but actually becomes a resource that enriches community. This concept stands in contrast with uniformity, which attempts to achieve homogeneity by erasing differences through the creation of a single acceptable standard and then requiring everyone to adhere to that standard. There are many ways in which uniformity can be a useful goal, such as in developing standards for manufacturing. But as a social ideal it can and has led to serious negative consequences.

The definitions we have so far described are those we feel have been relatively stable over time in the literature. The one exception is “worldview,” which is a term that has been more recently employed in order to encompass all identities: religious, secular, spiritual, as well as those identities that individuals have not fully realized or those that cross category boundaries (Bryant, 2011). The need for an all-encompassing term that can be consistently used by scholars and practitioners is pressing. Over the last 20 years or so, higher education scholars writing in this area have struggled to establish one single term that both accurately and inclusively describes these identities. “Worldview” is just the latest attempt.

Historically, the blanket term used by many writing on these identities was “faith”.

**Faith:**
For many people, particularly those who identify as religious, faith and religion are considered to be synonymous. One’s faith is equivalent to one’s set of beliefs, as bounded by religious tradition, spiritual insight, and personal interpretations of these convictions. (We recognize that the definition of faith has changed with the evolution of religions over the course of history; however, we are focused here on its current uses.) Interfaith, therefore, is the attempt by people of different religious traditions to understand and collaborate with each other. This is necessarily limiting for organizations and institutions interested in the convergences among religious, secular, and spiritual identities.

This common definition of faith was modified with the advent of theoretical works on faith development theory, most notably by James Fowler, who in his highly influential 1981 book described faith in the following way:

Seeking inclusive language to engage religious, secular, and spiritual identities is especially important given recent changes in religious identification in the U.S.

For more information, see: *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*
Faith, rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents or religious practice and belief. Each of the major religious traditions studied speaks about faith in ways that make the same phenomenon visible. In each and all, faith involves an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart, in accordance with a vision of transcendent value and power, one’s ultimate concern. (Fowler, 1981, p. 14)

Notably, “one’s ultimate concern” (Fowler, 1981, p. 14) is one considered to be universal, for the religious and non-religious alike. This is the cases even though faith exists in “relation to transcendence,” (p. 14) a concept which does not necessarily apply to those who identify as secular and whose ultimate concern does not, in fact, transcend the here and now. Fowler also specifically states that the opposite of faith is nihilism, not doubt or disbelief (p. 31). In other words, he explicitly attempted to have his definition be inclusive of people who identify as secular.

This expanded usage of the term faith further grew with Sharon Daloz Parks, a prominent theorist in higher education. As she wrote in Big Questions, Worthy Dreams (2000) faith is “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (p. 7). Parks also claims a universality with this definition, but a tension remains between traditional understandings of the term (and its links to religiosity) and these attempts at widening the circle of inclusion. Simply put: secular individuals may not view the term “faith” as applying to them. And that is clearly problematic for work with inclusive intent, and therefore cannot be unreflexively applied to the work of Convergence.

Multifaith:

Interestingly, the term “multifaith” has entered the conversation in recent years, as a slight tweak on “interfaith.” The term arose most prominently with the emergence of various multifaith centers on college and university campuses, as well as corresponding literature about this rising phenomenon (i.e. Johnson & Laurence, 2012).

Multifaith environments are created to include members of a diverse range of meaning-making traditions, religious or otherwise. The usage of “multi” instead of “inter” as a prefix suggests two new components: first, the movement beyond traditional dual-religion dialogues (i.e. Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue) to relationships among a multiplicity of people with various identities, and second, the specific inclusion of those who are “spiritual but not religious” and secular. Both of these components help to remove the power imbalance between those in the religious majority and those who are not. However, the reliance of “faith” as the base of this term continues to implicitly exclude these latter identities.

Concluding Thoughts

It is not just “faith” that remains a problematic term. Scholars who identify as secular have spoken out against the blanket use of the term “spiritual,” because although it suggests a separation from traditional religious belief, the term still implies a connection to God or an otherwise sacred plane of being (Goodman, Wilson, & Nicolazzo, 2015). “Worldview” is appropriately broad, but potentially too vague a substitute for the nouns “worldview” or “faith”? “Perspective” works as a noun, but seems too weak for our purposes. While “worldview” may be too vague, if we were to abandon our search for a single noun (at least temporarily) and use a short phrase instead, we might come up with something like “philosophic or religious worldview,” or “foundational source of meaning.”

In the end, we offer these definitions as a starting point toward the emergence of a common language around identity, a language that will allow us to engage in dialogue that helps us relate to each other within a common context. We propose focusing our shared vocabulary around the term “meaning,” as this is what humanity is doing; creating sense, significance, and understanding out of the disparate experiences and beliefs of our lives, as these intertwine with the critical elements of our identities and cultures. We exist within “meaning-making communities,” whether these be religious, secular, or spiritual.

And when we engage across the differences between these communities, we participate in “dialogues across meaning-making communities.” Such dialogue can be the beginning of a movement toward creating more harmonious campus communities and toward fostering the development of a new generation of enlightened global citizens.

We encourage you to share your own thoughts on this topic. Dr. Laurence and Dr. Small will participate in a Convergence webinar on April 25th at 100 EDT to discuss this article. Click here to register to participate in this conversation.

References


And yet here I was, replacing the chaplain’s role at F&M in the newly created role of Director for Faith and Convocation, officially welcoming all of F&M’s first year students into their new home. Faculty and students alike were dressed in academic regalia, the student’s robes being simple with the exception of a cord that represents the House they are affiliated with at this small, selective liberal arts college in Lancaster, PA. I was somewhat surprised to be donning my own doctoral robes again so soon after graduating from the University of Delaware just a few months prior. And in some ways, I saw this as my own welcome and introduction to this academic community. That introduction came in the form of sharing a few words at the beginning of the ceremony, a task often reserved for a chaplain or ordained member of the clergy. And yet here I was, replacing the chaplain’s role at F&M in the newly created role of Director for Faith and Convocation. I sought to find the right words, to build a bridge between the sacred and secular in order to help students make meaning of the journey they were about to embark upon.

I have no illusions that the F&M first year students in front of me that day committed any of what I said to memory, but the process was an important one for me. It helped me start to formulate my own ideas and priorities regarding the path that I hoped to help students work while at F&M. I’d previously worked for eight years in Residence Life and Housing, first at Emerson College and then later at the University of Delaware. During this time I also pursued my Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership at UD, where I graduated in the spring of 2017. Through my doctoral program, designed to bridge practice and scholarship, I examined the learning associated with interfaith engagement by students at the University of Delaware, and I explored how UD might better support religious pluralism and interfaith engagement on campus in ways that tie into its general education outcomes and diversity goals. I also had a chance to develop a number of programmatic initiatives related to interfaith engagement. It is with this context that I found myself in my new role at F&M, coming from a very traditional student affairs background into a role focused on supporting the religious, spiritual, and meaning-making pursuits of students, along with helping to engage the religious diversity on campus and in the community.

In this article, I will attempt to describe my transition from a more traditional student affairs role into a position where I focus on the religious, spiritual, and meaning-making pursuits of college students. I will also describe the practices I’ve cultivated in my first year at F&M that I believe have helped frame my work thus far and will hopefully lead to success in the future. I hope that this article will provide opportunity for conversation regarding the ways in which work related to religious pluralism and interfaith engagement fits within student affairs at colleges and universities.

Traditionally, F&M has had a college chaplain, an ordained person responsible for overseeing religious and spiritual life at the College along with providing guidance, mentorship, and support for all students. The decision was made to move away from a traditional chaplain position. However, there was still the belief that it was important to have someone at the College to not only assume some of the roles traditionally held by college Chaplain but also who had broader responsibilities for developing opportunities for interfaith engagement with a focus on religious pluralism. The rationale as I understand it was that having a person ordained within a particular faith tradition may create barriers for some students that don’t identify with that person’s faith. I, on the other hand, am not formally affiliated with a particular religious tradition within my role and also bring experience and training in student affairs that former chaplains did not have.

My role as Director for Faith and Convocation thus far has been defined broadly, with ample room to innovate. At the most basic level, I work with all of the religiously affiliated student clubs on campus, along with their advisors and community partners. I’m the point person at the College to provide mentorship and support for students exploring their worldview identities, and I’m here for occasions when the College community is seeking to make meaning of events that are happening around them. I’ve also been given space to explore and further define this role.

Early on, I wondered where I should focus my efforts. Recognizing that college is a time when students are seeking purpose and meaning, should I be focused on ensuring that all students feel they have the space and opportunity to explore their religious, secular, or spiritual identities? If so, this would include ensuring students with specific religious identities can not only practice their faith but also find ways to deepen it and understand it in new ways. This would also mean helping all students in their journey as they seek out meaning and purpose in their lives. Or should my primary focus be in the area where I have the most previous experience, namely interfaith engagement and religious pluralism on campus? This would include creating the opportunities for students from different religious, secular, and spiritual identities to come together, build relationships, develop respect for one another, and find ways to act around shared values. Emerging research (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Dahl & Morin, 2017) has demonstrated the benefits for students who are engaged in activities related to interfaith cooperation, along with the challenges presented by religious diversity. It is also easy to argue for the civic relevance of this work (Patel & Meyer, 2013). Ultimately, I’ve recognized that it can’t be an “either/or”, but that my role on campus is to ensure each student has the support and opportunities to explore their own religious, secular, or spiritual identities while also prioritizing religious pluralism and interfaith engagement.

I want to share some of the key priorities that I believe are essential to start this work. Moreover, I hope that these suggestions are helpful for anyone else who is working in student affairs and also supporting religious and spiritual life on campus and doing work around interfaith engagement, either formally or informally. In my first year, those priorities have included ensuring I have a clear vision for my own identity in approaching this work, committing to self-assessment and identification of areas for growth, particularly around my own religious literacy, and building strategic partnerships on campus and in the community.
Who Am I?
It might be too strong of a statement to say that this new role caused an existential crisis, though it did cause me to critically think about who I am professionally. When I introduced myself for the first time at F&M, the only reference point many staff, faculty, and students had was the previous chaplain’s position. I found myself on countless occasions explaining that while I still am responsible for many of the same things the previous chaplain’s role encompassed, I also have new responsibilities. In articulating those responsibilities, I came to the realization that my professional identity still sat squarely where I’ve placed it in the past. I am an educator.

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When working in residence life, I spent time creating opportunities for students to learn within their co-curricular and living environments, promoting student success and ensuring that those environments contributed to their learning while in college. My current role at F&M is no different, in the sense that my responsibility is still to contribute to student learning, primarily in the co-curricular environment. I’ve relied on past practices that I’ve cultivated as a student affairs professional. This includes ensuring that my work is derived from measurable learning outcomes that connect to goals and priorities not only of my office but of the broader institution. I also must make sure that I am able to assess that learning in ways that contributes to improvement of my own practices. Having clearly defined learning outcomes and ways to assess those outcomes within the context of one’s work is an essential skill for anyone in higher education and student affairs, and I’ve found that it is no different doing work focused on religious and spiritual life.

In fact, it may be increasingly important in this case as work around students’ religious, secular, or spiritual worldviews may not be broadly recognized as important or understood by all across the institution.

With that in mind, I have found it important to embrace the role of scholar-practitioner. There is a tremendous amount of new research being done regarding religious diversity and interfaitch engagement on campus. One prominent example is the Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Longitudinal Survey, which is a partnership between research teams led by Dr. Matt Mayhew, Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach, and the Interfaith Youth Core (for example, see Rockenbach, 2017). I believe it is important for someone working in religious and spiritual life to not only be aware of emerging research like this, but to think about how it influences practice. There is also a responsibility to generate new knowledge, even if it is only to answer local questions about the student population at a specific institution. And lastly, it’s important to be aware of best practices happening at other institutions. I’m fortunate enough to be part of a network of other liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania. Connecting with colleagues at these institutions to learn more about what they are doing has been extremely helpful as I develop my own way forward.

In your own practice, how do you build convergences and intersections between religious, secular, and spiritual work and the more traditional roles of student affairs practitioners?

With this being said, I’ve needed to have a clear understanding of my institution’s mission and goals, along with the division that I work in. F&M takes to heart its identity as a liberal arts institution, and one of the priorities of the division that I work in is a focus on civic engagement. I’ve begun to build my own outcomes for students grounded in this institutional context. I’m currently re-writing the mission, values, and outcomes for my office, along with engaging in a division-wide strategic planning process. This will allow me to approach my work as an educator, with specific outcomes that will guide all of my efforts. Broadly, these efforts include creating a supportive environment for students to explore and express their worldviews, helping students cultivate relationships across difference and feel a sense of belonging at the college as a result of their engagement with diverse religious, secular, and spiritual worldviews, and connect across shared values by acting cooperatively together. Furthermore, I am seeking ways for students to engage critically with one another around big questions related to religious, secular, and spiritual diversity, and not shy away from disagreement. However, to do this, I know that I must rely upon my skills developed over time working in student affairs and approach my role first and foremost as an educator and scholar-practitioner.

Self-Reflection and New Learning

Early in the fall semester, I began driving some of the Muslim students to prayers at the local Islamic Community Center. Rather than having someone else take them, I felt that it was a good opportunity to get to know some of the students in a different way. Every Friday, I pick them up at a designated spot on campus and drive them to prayers, and I also go with them to attend the service. I’ve found that some of my most fruitful conversations with students have happened on the ride back to campus each Friday afternoon. The students are able to share with me what they learned that week, and I am able to tell them what knowledge I gleaned from the service. This gives them a chance to talk openly about their worldview with a professional at their college, and it gives me a unique opportunity to discuss what I learned through the lens of my own worldview. We can then relate that learning back to their lives as college students. This is just one example of where I’ve worked to connect with students in their space, and it provides opportunity for mutual learning.

Students have also reached out to me to set up one-on-one meetings to discuss something they are facing that is in some way related to their religious, secular, or spiritual identity. Often in the course of conversations, they revealed thoughts and questions back on me, asking how I have worked through the questions they are posing in relation to my own worldview. It was rare in my previous role working in residence life for a student to ask me about my religious identity. In my new role, there is an openness to it as students see me as someone at the institution with whom they can engage with specifically about matters related to religious, secular, and spiritual identities. It has created an opportunity for me to do a lot of self-reflection, and to ask myself some of the big questions I expect my students to be grappling with. It is an opportunity to continually evaluate my values and worldview and think about how I can talk about those things in the course of conversations with students.

In student affairs, we are often asked to reflect on our own values and how they guide our work. This role is no different, except that it opens up the door to explicitly think about those values through the lens of my worldview, and to seek out ways to articulate those values to students in a way that helps them make sense of their own religious, secular, or spiritual identity. While many in student affairs may traditionally be more private with this aspect of their identity with students, bridging student affairs and religious life may mean finding ways to be more transparent in this regard. My experience has been that when I can appropriately share some of my own insights, values, and beliefs, it gives students permission to do the same with one another.

On your campus, what language is currently used to engage in religious, secular, and spiritual work? Do different offices or different divisions use different language? What is the impact of those language choices?
I also recognize that I’m not an expert on the intricacies of every religious, secular, and spiritual worldview. Just like I ask my students to speak from their own experience and not feel like they are speaking for an entire tradition or worldview, in these moments I try to help them see that I am speaking from my own experience as well. With this being said, I have found it increasingly important to actively increase my own religious literacy. I’ve given myself permission to spend time reading books and articles about diverse worldview identities, and more importantly put myself in spaces within the community that are grounded in diverse worldview traditions. This is why it has been so important to spend time with the Muslim students at Friday prayers, or to meet Jewish students during Shabbat dinner. I am not only forming relationships with them, but I am gaining insight into how my students practice within their tradition, and it creates opportunities to ask them questions that allow for reflection on their part. It also inspires me to continue to seek new knowledge about diverse worldview identities, explore how those identities manifest themselves within the campus community, and think about how that then impacts my work.

Building Partnerships

I am essentially an office of one, being the only professional staff member at the College whose responsibility it is to do work in this area for students. Very quickly, I recognized that if I am to be successful, it would be important to cultivate relationships with people across the College. In fact, if I do not do this I find that my work can feel isolating. I worked quickly to identify those individuals and offices that it would be important to connect with. I’ve met with Counseling Services to discuss how we may support one another, sharing who I am, where my skills lie, and learning about the needs they serve. We’ve developed a relationship that now encourages us to refer students to one another when necessary, and we will even be developing some collaborative group sessions for students where our offices will partner in the future. The Wellness office has also been an essential partner, as we’ve explored intersections related to mindfulness, something that F&M has prioritized. The Office of Civic Engagement is a key partner, as they are well-connected with many community partners in the area. This is an important resource, as I strive to help students connect their values to action in ways that allows them to serve with one another and as a way to also connect across difference. Faculty have been essential, as I am exploring ways to bridge the curricular and co-curricular within the College’s general education program.

Along with partnerships with those officially affiliated with the College, there are also numerous community partners who have been key to my work; namely, folks who are partners with the various student religious clubs on campus. This might include a staff member working for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or the Catholic Campus ministry. Fortunately, I had experience working with people in these roles during my time at UD developing interfaith initiatives, and I’ve found them to be critical to my success in my current role. These are individuals who are highly invested in the formation and development of students. It’s been my job to learn about their goals, communicate mine, and find space to bring them all together to collaborate. It is likely that anyone in a role similar to mine will be working with community partners like this, and often times serve as the official voice between them and the institution. They can provide a unique insight into the student experience, and as I learn from them, I must recognize my responsibility in supporting and advocating for them when needed as well.

These are but a few examples of how partnerships have been key to my role. They have been means to share knowledge, resources, and expertise with one another so we can serve our students in diverse ways. I also recognize that in order to broaden partnership opportunities, it is important for staff and faculty to understand my work and how students’ religious, secular, and spiritual identities intersect with their work. I am currently working with a team that plans professional development opportunities for staff, and I plan to host a session on religious diversity in higher education, in hopes of helping my colleagues make these connections. Just as important, opportunities like this also help me recognize what I can learn from my colleagues and their roles. If work related to students’ religious, secular, and spiritual worldviews is going to be fully integrated into student affairs, opportunities to not only develop partnerships but also see how those partnerships are mutually beneficial, enhancing the overall student experience, are essential.

The path I pursued in student affairs, both within my professional role and later in my doctoral program, created the opportunity for me to now serve in the capacity that I do. Fortunately, student affairs allows for one to serve as an educator in diverse ways. It takes time to identify one’s skills, knowledge, and passions and then pursue opportunities that align all of those things. Theologian Frederick Buechner (1993) writes that one’s vocation is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need. I feel like I have found that space in my work. I find a tremendous amount of joy in helping students explore their inner lives and learn from one another across differences related to their worldviews. I also believe that cultivating religious pluralism is increasingly important to successfully engage in today’s world. If colleges and universities are going to take this work seriously, more individuals must work in the convergence of student affairs and religious and spiritual life. As I’ve sought to pursue this work, I’ve taken the time to better understand my own identity and approach, have sought opportunities for new learning, and built mutually beneficial partnerships. I know these are only the first steps as I grow this role in a way that makes a significant impact on students and the College, but I hope these steps provide some insight for others on ways to approach work at this intersection.

References

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Holi Toledo Now: A Conversation with 2015–16 Holi Student Director Ajay Lingireddy

By Jeanine Diller, University of Toledo and Convergence Board of Directors

FOUR YEARS AGO THIS SPRING, the Center for Religious Understanding at the University of Toledo held our first annual Holi Toledo—a full-campus immersion in Holi, an Indian cultural holiday with Hindu roots that celebrates spring by throwing powdered colors on people (for more information on Holi, see Finlay, 2016; Fisher & Rinehart, 2017; and Sommerlad, 2017). Though Holi is one of the oldest continuously practiced holidays on the planet, it still has legs: a Holi craze has been sweeping campuses across the nation over the past decade, from Colgate to Texas A&M to Harvard, among many others (for examples, see Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute, 2016 and O’Malley, 2014). These are boisterous parties with color throwing and music and dancing, like ours. But from the start, our version of Holi was designed to be different. We aimed to make Holi an intentional site of religious and cultural awareness-raising in the midst of the hilarity, producing what one of our administrators deemed the best diversity event our campus has ever seen.

After its launch, we published a detailed account of the who-what-where-when-why-how of Holi Toledo, which we commend to your attention for all the details (Diller & Gad, 2015). Here, our main mission is to update you on how Holi Toledo has grown since then, but let me offer a few high points from its beginnings to bring you up to date.

First, we took it to be a condition of having Holi Toledo that the Indian and Hindu community build the event with us from the ground up. That way, our celebration of Holi would be a cultural gift instead of a cultural appropriation (for more on this concern, see Matas, 2016). We were overjoyed when our Indian Students Cultural Organization (ISCO) told us they not only wanted to work with us but even had tried to hold Holi themselves a couple years earlier and had been stopped by the janitors. Together we got the event approved by UT Grounds and then began to structure it.

ISCO taught us at the Center for Religious Understanding that Holi was not just a religious holiday but also a cultural one. That widened our goal: Holi Toledo would be a site not just for religious but also for cultural learning. That widening brought a third partner to our table, UT’s Center for International Studies and Programs, which further strengthened the event base. It also led us to make the point of the event to raise awareness of both religions and cultures, in two ways. First, we invite someone from the Hindu-Indian community to open the whole celebration by explaining Holi and its cultural manifestation in India. Over the years, the opening speech has been made either by a leader from ISCO or from Toledo’s Hindu Temple; we have had the honor of having our local Hindu priest open it twice so far. Second, we invite all our campus’ religious and cultural student organizations—that is about 30 groups in all, about half of whom participate—to create informational booths to line the “color-throwing zone.” These booths are chock full of artifacts, pamphlets and information, a blast to look at themselves. More importantly, the booths are staffed by their own student members ready to engage in short but meaningful exchanges about their religion or culture. Each year, the organizing team identifies three questions to start such conversations (“Tell me about a… filling out the end with “tradition, belief, experience, person,” etc.). Those questions go on the student organization’s Holi t-shirts, so they are actually wearing the prompts in the midst of the melee.

How do you get the Holi attendees to actually ask the booth staff these questions? We make it a condition of getting color to throw on your friends that you get it at the booths. This makes time for the brief Q and A to happen while the student organizational staff scoops out color for the attendee. Those 30-second conversations are really the heart of Holi Toledo: they are short but meaningful exchanges from student to student about their culture or religion, stated in the midst of the fun. There are additional bells and whistles (well, Bollywood music!), and some of the details have changed over the years, but that is the basic structure of the event: throwing color, and getting color to throw by having a quick interfaith or intercultural conversation at a student-run booth.
We've now held Holi Toledo three times, each year drawing a crowd of about 500 people. Here we offer a retrospective on the event in an interview with Ajay Lingireddy, the Student Director of Holi Toledo in 2015 and 2016, during his junior and senior years, and consultant in 2017.

Jeanine Diller: Tell me first what you love about Holi Toledo. What drew you to be so involved with this event?

Ajay Lingireddy: There are very few events on any university campus that bring as many different kinds of people together as Holi does. For example, the Indian Students Cultural Organization and the Saudi Club are not going to participate in MusicFest [UT’s annual free music concert before our first football game, featuring student bands and more]. Sure we will get those clubs at the International Dinner but then we lose the Catholic Student Association and the Bible Club. So the draw is that Holi brings in both religious and cultural organizations; it would be statistically impossible to have 12 booths per year if it were only one or the other.

JD: It’s nice that including both kinds of groups helped build the event. We had originally thought Holi would showcase just the religious student organizations since we were running this out of the Center for Religious Understanding. We added cultural ones when you all helped me understand that Holi on the ground in India was really a cultural holiday now, though no one denies its religious roots.

AL: That’s right. Holi is definitely religious and cultural; anyone in India would say so. And that makes Holi pretty unique. Most Indian holidays are Hindu holidays, but even ones that aren’t often still become religious holidays. For example, the Harvest Festival that occurs in January at the end of the growing season has no religious mythology or sacred text or religious aspect behind it, but we still make it into a religious festival by worshipping in the morning and going to the temple in the evening. So even though it has no religious roots at all, the Harvest Festival still became a religious holiday. Holi is the opposite of that. Even though it has religious roots in Krishna and Radha and more, it has become a pan-Indian, pan-cultural holiday.

We don’t go to the temple; we listen to Bollywood music not religious music, and everyone participates, Christians and Muslims included. Respecting that makes Holi logistically feasible. It is really, really fun—a very visual and tactile holiday that gets people participating.

JD: Is that true at UT too? The fun and optics and open feel of Holi draw you in?

AL: Yes. You can’t be a passive participant. You can’t be in a bubble if you are going to be in Holi. You have to interact. Usually you interact by throwing the colors, but at UT we amp it up with the student organization tables. The first time I explained to the Indian Student Cultural Organization and others who had celebrated Holi in India that at Holi Toledo we were not only going to celebrate the festival but also have interfaith dialogue, they were surprised; they had thought this was going to be just a color free-for-all like it is back home. But they were pleasantly surprised; they were open to it.

JD: And how does it work—mixing colors and conversation?

AL: It makes the interfaith dialogue more genuine, actually. It’s with our own age group, our own peers, and it’s real interaction. It’s not just I’m here so I need to speak or listen. It’s much more voluntary, not faked or forced. It’s not a debate either. I could be from Hillel and go to an MSA [Muslim Student Association] table and ask them what they believe, and I might not agree with what they say, in fact I might be diametric opposites to them, but because of the situation we are in with blaring music, laughing and having a good time, I’m just going to take what they say at face value, and understand that’s what they believe instead of arguing. No one is here to pick a fight; no one is here to preach or proselytize. Everyone is here to have fun.

JD: When we were planning Holi the first time, we realized the conversations were going to have to be brief—all we had was the time it takes to scoop out color and give it to someone. So we came up with those three prompts each year—as such as ‘Tell me about…a tradition or an experience or a belief,’ etc.—to try to make these brief conversations meaningful. How has that idea panned out?

AL: We drilled it in with the booth staff that we are shooting for short and meaningful. Shorter really helps the dialogue. If it were longer, people would either lose interest or get too involved. The duration also helps you remember. I walked up to the H2O table [H2O is a non-denominational Protestant Bible fellowship on campus] during my first Holi, and I remember them saying something about “Jesus” and “water.” Here it is three years later and I still remember a couple words.

JD: Is there anything else you want to add about what Holi Toledo has to offer?

AL: At the risk of sounding cliché, one great thing about it is that people from all these colors and races and backgrounds are in Holi but once you get color on you, you can’t even tell what color you really are. I don’t wear my glasses on Holi so telling people apart becomes even harder. It’s classic to say it but there are no boundaries.

For brief scholarly coverage of Holi, turn to the chapter on Hinduism in most textbooks on the world’s religions, such as Mary Pat Fisher’s Living Religions. For some great street footage of Holi in India, visit here; and for an interesting take on the colors themselves, visit here.
JD: How do you do that?
AL: The biggest one is participation. Once you decide to conduct Holi, the most important thing is you have to reach out to the other student organizations. For me, reaching out was a combination of asking personally, or texting a friend in the organization, or finding people on Facebook and adding them as friends and then messaging them there, or going to their webpage and emailing them to invite them to participate. The aim is to guarantee their presence at the planning meeting. There is no way around getting these organizations together. People may say they don’t have enough students or enough time, but the goal is to make it sound like so much fun that nobody can say no.

JD: How do you do that?
AL: Just throwing colors in the sun with a DJ is a draw. But it is really key for the organizations to get free t-shirts with a color unique to their organization. Our cash prizes for organizations [$150 each for the best decorated booth, the most informative booth, and the booth with the most attendees] are good too. But I have seen so many organizations with pictures of people lined up in all their purples and all their blues. They don’t all have the money to have designed t-shirts. Holi is the one time these student orgs can all be wearing the same thing. It gives them a solidarity. I also emphasize the promotion; having a booth puts you on the map. People will want to see you and want to talk to you.

JD: You’ve been with this event since the beginning. Have there been any useful changes we’ve made to it over the years?
AL: Well, I’d say there were two important changes. The first one was to have a real dialogue happen at the leaders’ planning meetings. Before it was mainly just logistics – introduce the event, organize them, make them choose a color for their organization’s shirts and table.

JD: Right, that’s how our planning meeting worked the first year, and I think the second one, when you stepped up to run it for the first time.
AL: Yes, I remember the first time I ran it very clearly; I was so nervous. It was a good number of student organizations that came to that first meeting – one or two representatives each from the Indian Student Cultural Organization, the International Student Association, the Muslim Student Association, and more, and H2O came. And I asked H2O: what are you guys? Christian University Bible Fellowship, non-denominational, they said. So I myself, in other words our organizer himself, learned about a new group that day. That’s the kind of awareness the event brings.

JD: That’s great. I didn’t even know that.
AL: Then we started realizing how unusual it is that we have the leaders of all these religious and cultural groups together in one room. So we decided to have the leaders not only do logistics but also talk, dialogue, exchange. We asked them to talk about any tradition in their culture important to them, and to tell us about something new they learned from this meeting and previous ones. I remember the Nepalese Student Organization meeting the Saudi Club for the first time at one of these meetings and they were gussing all over each other, saying they never knew we even had a Nepalese club, saying they seemed to be doing really cool things and they wanted to go to each other’s events, etc. They knew about each other only because of that meeting and because I’d asked them to talk among each other.

JD: These are meaningful side results we hadn’t even planned for. What was the second important change we made since the first Holi?
AL: We held a forum [a small group dialogue] on Holi Eve – open to all members of the organization, not just the leaders—a Holi-themed forum the night before. At least 20 people came, maybe more, at our really good appetizers and talked about the Holi themes for the year [the three prompts on the student org shirts, tell me about a tradition, an experience, a story, etc.]. The Holi Eve forum really legitimized Holi itself: this is a thing at UT, as UT a tradition as MusicFest or football. We do ours in the same place as MusicFest, but MusicFest is at night and ours is in broad daylight so people see us. They want to know what it’s about and want to participate. It looks fun, the music is loud, the event grabs a lot of attention. And we have become a tradition. Proof of that is that when I wasn’t even on main campus anymore [Ajay has gone on to UT’s medical school], I got messages from people asking me when Holi was, tagging me on Facebook with their friends’ posts. We have become one of the big annual campus events, right up there with MusicFest and the International Dinner. I’m very proud of that.

JD: Yes, someone said the very same thing to me—that Holi was up there with MusicFest. We’ve hit the big time! For the record, my two proudest Holi moments: first, when the diversity staff told me this was the best diversity event they’d ever seen on campus, and second, when an administrator approached me during Holi one year, both of us covered in color, and said: ‘We spend so much money trying to make students happy here. This event just does it, for not much money. Just look at them.’

The administrator pointed to all the students dancing and laughing near us. It is true. They were happy, and year in and year out, our attendees are happy. Remarkably, they are also happy together—across all the lines of difference that brought them there, culturally, religiously, and more. Holi Toledo has taught me the power of joy. Introducing joy into these complex relationships, even for just an hour or two, is like using oil to lubricate an old bike chain: all the works that jarred and sputtered start to flow.

References
Contributors

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Jeanine Diller is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy and Program on Religious Studies at the University of Toledo. She teaches and researches in philosophy of religion and religious studies, concentrating especially on the nature of ultimate reality and the power of religion to change the world for ill and for good.

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Peter Laurence has been working in the interfaith field since the mid-1980s. Prior to retirement he was Executive Director of the Education as Transformation Project at Wellesley College and is currently a member of the Convergence Board of Directors. He is the author and/or editor of numerous professional books and articles concerning religion and spirituality in higher education.

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J. Cody Nielsen is Founder and Executive Director of Convergence on Campus. After a dozen years at the intersections of religious, secular, and spiritual identity and higher education, Cody remains focused on fostering an environment in higher education dedicated to intersectionality, justice, and incorporation of religious and non-religious identity into the core diversity work of the academy. He writes, consults, and is completing his Ph.D. in Higher Education administration at Iowa State University. He lives in Boston with his partner Katie.

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Call for Submissions

CONVERGENCE MAGAZINE WILL FOCUS ON TWO AREAS OF CONVERGENCE: 1) the convergence between religious, secular, and spiritual identities on college campuses, and 2) the convergence between administrators and faculty members in all levels of higher education and religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals (including those in campus ministry positions). The magazine's objective is to promote harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens through spreading understanding among those who espouse a wide range of identities and worldviews.

The target audience for Convergence Magazine is professionals, students, and scholars located on college campuses in the areas served through the publication's content. In addition, the magazine is aimed to those working in related fields beyond campus borders, such as in religious organizations, schools of theology, and houses of worship, and in non-profits and educational service organizations serving the field of higher education student affairs.

Convergence Magazine will be published online on a quarterly basis and will act as one of the pillars of the Convergence organization, others of which will include training professionals, consultation with universities, organizational systems and collaborations, and additional content (blog, podcast, webinars, and conferences).

Editors of Convergence Magazine will solicit contributions in the following categories:

1. Promising practices
   Practitioners from all divisions, particularly those employed in the target convergence areas, are invited to tell the stories of the successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

2. Administration and policy
   Administrators and other professionals are invited to describe the higher-order administrative practices and implemented policies that have led to successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

3. Opinion
   All higher education professionals are invited to share their opinions on steps that can be taken within our shared field to promote the two categories of convergence. (Word count: between 2,000 and 3,000 words)

In addition to on-the-ground practitioners and administrators, the editors invite faculty and graduate students to submit articles in the above categories. However, the focus should remain on concrete strategies and ideas for practical implementation.

Convergence Magazine is not a research journal. The tone of the magazine will be forthright and conversational, rather than research-intensive. However, as the editors strongly believe that all promising practices, policies, and opinions are undergirded by high-quality research, we expect that cited references to supporting literature will be included in all published pieces. Please utilize the APA 6th edition for formatting these references.

Call for Submissions
Submissions for each quarterly issue will be due two months prior to the publication month, on the 15th of the month. For example, upcoming submission deadlines will be:

May 15, 2018 for publication in July 2018
August 15, 2018 for publication in October 2018
November 15, 2018 for publication in January 2019

Any submission that misses a deadline will automatically be considered for the following issue.

Note: Submissions to Convergence Magazine do not need to be blinded. Because the editors are seeking stories based on real-world experiences, details about specific campuses and programs are necessary and should not be anonymized. Authors should think carefully about whether this is appropriate for the articles they are submitting.

Because Convergence Magazine is an online publication, authors are invited to submit full-color photos to accompany their pieces.

To be considered for publication, upload your document and photos at the following website.

Questions can be directed to Stephanie Sanger-Miller, Convergence Associate Director, at stephanie@convergenceoncampus.org.

More information about the Convergence organization can be found at www.convergenceoncampus.org.
What We’re Talking About

What’s Being Talked about on the Convergence Blog

CODY NIELSEN EXPLAINS THE REASONS FOR THE FORMATION OF CONVERGENCE

PETER LAURENCE REFLECTS ON THE EDUCATION AS TRANSFORMATION PROJECT AND OTHER PRECURSORS TO THE WORK OF CONVERGENCE

ASHA SHIPMAN DESCRIBES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIGHT TO THE HINDU TRADITION