

Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education

Compiled on behalf of participants in a Wingspread
Conference by the Society for Values in Higher Education.

We encourage
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to consider the following
framework, questions,
and recommendations...

**Society for
Values in
Higher Education**



THE JOHNSON FOUNDATION
Wingspread Conference Center

In July 2005, scholars from public and private colleges and universities—representing diverse disciplines, geographic regions, and faith perspectives—came together at the historic Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The purpose of this gathering, entitled Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education, was to discuss the growing awareness of and concern over the intersection between religion and public life and to define the role that higher education must play in response to those concerns. In an animated and sometimes difficult conversation, conference participants narrowed and defined the areas of focus. At the end of the gathering, participants agreed that the points of concern raised at the Wingspread conference call for study, dialogue, critique, and action. The academy must examine how it teaches about religion; how it welcomes students' diverse religious views and spiritual interests; and how it factors religion into its educational programs and initiatives to strengthen deliberative democracy, all the while preserving standards of intellectual inquiry, public reason, and academic freedom.

This document is a result of a collaborative effort by the conference participants while at Wingspread and through remote consultation in the months that followed. Each section begins with critical questions that scholars might ask themselves and their institutions. Following the questions are specific observations and suggestions that are intended to foster conversation rather than to serve as final or definitive answers to the questions.

OVERVIEW

Religion has always played a significant role in shaping American society. The nation's religious heritage, including its pluralism, remains deeply intertwined with American culture and identity. In recent decades, however, public prominence of religious views has grown even as the nation's religious diversity has increased. In this context, maintaining a pluralistic democracy demands a corresponding advance in our citizens' capacity to understand religious differences, as well as the ability and willingness to engage across differences of belief for the sake of the common good.

We are disturbed by surveys that reveal a citizenry inexperienced in engaging others on issues of religious and moral differences and moral debate. It is also worrisome that studies suggest that Americans are increasingly less tolerant of others' religious views while being less likely to compromise when their religious views are at stake. That all this is happening at a time when an increasingly large segment of the American public is studying in institutions of higher education raises directly the question of the academy's appropriate response to these developments.

We assume that colleges and universities serve as our nation's collective think tank and, arguably, conscience. Changes in the landscape of religion in American public life provide the academy with myriad opportunities for fulfilling that role—for study, dialogue, critique, and action. However religion is all too often confined to religious studies programs and campus ministries or accepted without critical inquiry. In this statement, we challenge colleges and universities to reexamine how religion is studied and taught. All students, regardless of their beliefs and values, need to understand how

religions work. They need to know the constructive and critical appraisals of religion's historic and contemporary significance and, in particular, its impact on public life. We call for a renewed commitment to intellectual inquiry standards, reason, and academic freedom and urge the academy to examine religion in those contexts. Further, we urge colleges and universities to be intentional about how they facilitate students' search for public purpose, self-understanding, and spirituality. We conclude with a call for further attention to the arts of a democratic citizenry. Despite different beliefs and perspectives, students—and their teachers—should be able to engage in a civic or classroom dialogue both thoughtfully and respectfully.

How might this vision be realized? There is no uniform approach, and each university will pursue its own programs and initiatives. We are particularly sensitive to the diverse missions among colleges and universities—religious institutions, non-religious private institutions, and public institutions. This statement addresses the common goal of colleges and universities: to prepare students to understand and participate in public life.

We encourage colleges and universities to consider the following framework, questions, and recommendations:



1 Religious Literacy

What do graduates need to know about religion in a diverse democracy and global society?

How well are we educating students for a religiously pluralistic democracy?

... It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

—Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963)

We recognize and value the contributions of religious studies scholars and programs at universities, but they cannot be expected to bear sole responsibility for advancing religious literacy. We challenge colleges and universities to examine their courses and curricula to put into practice new ways to educate students about religion's dimensions and influence. Students need to understand the historical relationship between religion and the disciplines—sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences—and the professions, as well as the contemporary relevance of religion to the disciplines, the professions, and public life. Students should understand the need to adhere rigorously to disciplinary procedures for constructing hypotheses and disciplinary standards for evaluating theories and truth claims.

Higher education must direct more attention to teacher education with respect to these concerns. American elementary and secondary schools frequently avoid the study of religion partly because it is viewed as too controversial, because of the scarcity of adequately prepared teachers, texts, and tested curricula, and due to confusion or concern regarding First Amendment freedoms. Teacher training is key to addressing these shortcomings.

Religion has resurfaced in American public life and global society as a source of conflict, violence, and corruption and, conversely, as a source of personal strength, civic engagement, creative solutions, and social change. Colleges and universities need to provide students with multiple interdisciplinary opportunities to engage in dialogue and grapple with these glaring contrasts and to understand their personal and social implications.

Colleges and universities must support faculty development so that faculty will learn how to manage both discussion and critique in ways that do not advocate for or denigrate religious views. Teaching about religion requires understanding of and respect for agnostics, atheists, and secularists, as well as for a broad range of religious perspectives. It would be naïve to assume that most faculty are already fully prepared to negotiate the philosophical complexities of debates concerning the rationality of belief or skepticism, to cope with religious diversity, to teach the value of religious pluralism, or to negotiate First Amendment principles.

2 Standards of Intellectual Inquiry, Reason, and Academic Freedom

How do academics preserve standards of intellectual inquiry, public reason, and academic freedom when faced with religiously grounded assertions?

How can the classroom be open to religious insights without promoting or denigrating specific religious beliefs?

What are the ground rules for civic discourse on matters of religion and public life?

How do we encourage civility, candor, and diversity of perspectives through our educational programs?

Nearly all colleges and universities aspire to prepare students to be informed, responsible, and engaged citizens in their communities, in American society, and in a complex, global world. As valuable as religious studies scholars and programs are, they alone cannot accomplish the objectives of this Declaration. We urge the academy to consider as a framework for discussion the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Abington Township v. Schempp*, in which the court said:

... [I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.*

The academy must preserve and enlarge its understanding of public reason by setting standards for inquiry and discourse. These standards of public reason should reflect the principles of rational discourse that lie at the basis of all academic inquiry. It is important to distinguish the ideals of rational inquiry—which are common features of many of the world's great religious traditions as well as Western philosophy and science—from both religious and secularist worldviews. Debate among worldviews is a valid, though often contentious, part of intellectual life. One of the university's most valuable contributions to democratic society lies in modeling how rational inquiry can contribute to these difficult and important kinds of public argument.

Higher education must foster a spirit of tolerance and actively champion an attitude of mutual respect and affirmation of the value of pluralism in a democracy without implicitly or explicitly privileging secularist worldviews or particular religious perspectives in the search for truth. Academics must explore ways to work with, rather than exclude, religious communities, and

all parties must abide by the rules of rational, academic inquiry.

The principles of academic freedom should be applied in ways that preserve the right to subject religious assertions to critique, challenge, and appropriate standards of argumentation, proof, and evidence and that welcome religious perspectives and secularist worldviews when they are relevant to the search for truth.

Higher education must preserve the essential principles of intellectual integrity and academic freedom in the face of pressures of ideological interference, whether religious or secular, from across the political spectrum. It is particularly important to preserve the minority voice. Religious minorities have the same right to the public square as religious majorities; committed nonbelievers and passionate believers are equally entitled to academic freedom.

Colleges and universities must support public scholarship and encourage public discourse and other exchanges among faculty and students and in partnership with surrounding communities. Both scholarship and programs should address the pressing ethical and social issues in American democracy and do so in ways that result in heightened public awareness, civility, and civic engagement.

Colleges and universities must support faculty development opportunities that help faculty engage in democratic dialogue that is both probative and inclusive.

Higher education must develop and practice models of deliberative democracy that strengthen communities and society in general. The academy must also mediate conversations between those motivated by the desire for greater freedom of religious expression in the public square and those who believe that a more secular public square offers the best hope for religious freedom and inter-religious peace. Colleges and universities must be models for American democracy.

3 Students Seeking Purpose and Spiritual Meaning

What is the responsibility of colleges and universities to respond to growing spiritual concerns among students?

To the extent that a college or university enables students' search for purpose or spiritual quest, how does it simultaneously hold to standards of intellectual inquiry and academic excellence?

If an institution's mission includes a commitment to educating students for personal and social responsibility, is a spiritual framework an appropriate template for student development?

In April 2005, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) of UCLA issued a report on the spiritual life of college students. The study revealed that three of every four college and university students say that they are "searching for meaning/purpose in life" and that they regularly discuss the meaning of life with friends. Students want to use their time in college partly to find meaning and purpose in their personal lives and their academic studies.

We recognize the tensions within academia that the study of spirituality raises. Many academics argue that secular colleges and public universities have no business facilitating students' spiritual formation; these institutions' responsibility is to provide an educational environment in which students are able to acquire knowledge, skills, and a sense of personal and social responsibility through disciplined questioning and intellectual challenges. Others respond, however, that this more limited view promotes a form of secularism that ignores the role of faculty as mentors. Students learn in the context of their personal values, beliefs, and experiences. Teaching and learning that ignores this dimension to student learning and development lacks authenticity or, worse, effectiveness. This mentor-teacher model applies to secular colleges and public

universities, as well, provided the approach does not include religious formation.

We call for each college and university to examine its mission and curricula, to engage in campus-wide dialogues, and to be intentional about whether and how it helps students explore their sense of purpose and the public relevance of their academic studies.

Programs designed to address students' search for purpose and self-understanding, whether such programs be academic or non-academic, should complement and enrich a student's educational experience.

Colleges and universities must work together or with existing consortia, associations, and other structures for multi-institutional collaboration to create new courses and programs.

Researchers must study and assess how attention to spiritual development in students influences student learning.

Conclusion

The study of religion and its public relevance is a crucial dimension to liberal education. All students should engage that study in ways that affirm intellectual inquiry, reason, and academic freedom. The study of religion and public life should never compromise rational discourse on campus nor should it subvert knowledge attained through disciplinary inquiry. Challenges to disciplinary or professional knowledge and practice should be raised through reasoned debate and academically accepted methods that enrich student learning.

Colleges and universities must make a genuine commitment to deliberative democracy by making a commitment to principles of inclusiveness and respect as foundations for dissent, dialogue, and action. Without these ground rules for democratic discourse,

the relationship between those motivated by religious beliefs and those motivated by other values will be defined by who is in the majority or in power, a rule that applies both in public life and on campus. This impasse is increasingly unacceptable to both the academy and the nation. It is the academy's responsibility to model a more positive, productive, and educationally sound form of engagement.



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* Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963)

** The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and are not a reflection of the National Institute of Health or the Department of Health and Human Services

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