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To cite this article: Rebecca Barton , Wendy Cadge & Elena G. van Stee (2020) Caring for the Whole Student: How Do Chaplains Contribute to Campus Life?, Journal of College and Character, 21:2, 67-85, DOI: [10.1080/2194587X.2020.1741392](https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2020.1741392)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2020.1741392>



Published online: 04 Jun 2020.



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Caring for the Whole Student: How Do Chaplains Contribute to Campus Life?

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Abstract

In the changing religious landscape of American higher education, campus chaplains offer vital resources to student affairs professionals. Drawing from interviews with 16 religiously diverse chaplains, this article presents the respondents' perspectives on the challenges facing students, as well as their own contributions to campus life. Chaplains described three central roles: bridge-building, community-building, and tending to the soul of the university. These findings indicate that chaplains, particularly those from non-Christian traditions, contribute to campus life in ways not yet indicated in the higher education literature. In light of these findings, the authors encourage collaboration among chaplains of all faiths and student affairs professionals.

The role of religion on college and university campuses in the United States has gone through significant changes since the establishment of institutions of higher education. In the 17th century, most colonial colleges were founded to train Protestant clergymen and had religion at the heart of their purpose. Today there is scholarly and public debate about how secular or religious university campuses are or should be. Student affairs professionals on college and university campuses increasingly focus on care for the “whole” student (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Furthermore, contemporary surveys show that student populations in these environments are more religiously and spiritually diverse than ever before and that a majority of students expect interfaith engagement and religious accommodation on their campuses (Kosmin & Keysar, 2013; Rockenbach et al., 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016).

Scholars who have written about religion and spirituality on college campuses have rarely focused on the staff and volunteers who play central roles in the religious and spiritual lives of students: campus chaplains (Astin et al., 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2014).

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Because campus chaplains work directly with students, they provide a unique vantage point from which to understand how students address religion and spirituality, as well which issues are most important to students today. Little is known, however, about how chaplains themselves understand the unique contributions they make to their respective campuses. Furthermore, the vast majority of studies that examine campus religious leaders' understandings of their roles include only Christian respondents (Craft et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2014; for an exception, see Khoja-Moolji, 2011). Recognizing the need for a broader understanding of how chaplains conceptualize their contributions to religious and spiritual life on campus, this article's authors highlight the perspectives of a diverse sample of chaplains, including many from non-Christian traditions.

We approach these issues concerned about the tensions surrounding religion in American institutions of higher education (Nord, 2010). Campus religious leaders and student life professionals have sometimes been in conflict with one another, particularly over issues related to membership and leadership criteria, facilities, and funding (Glanzer, 2011). Furthermore, in the United States the place and role of chaplains and other religious leaders have been complicated by questions about the relationship between church and state, especially in public institutions (Craft et al., 2009; Glanzer, 2011; Magolda, 2010; Temkin & Evans, 1998). Here, we focus on chaplains both to name these underlying tensions and theorize ways that future collaboration between religious leaders and student affairs personnel could be mutually beneficial.

We begin aware of the growing number of young adults who identify as *spiritual* but not *religious* (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017) and the emergence of chaplains from secular traditions (e.g., Humanism). Therefore, we argue that the term *religion* is too narrow to capture the diversity of 21st-century campus chaplaincy. Accordingly, although a majority of our respondents represent religious traditions and describe issues relevant to religious students, throughout this article we also refer more broadly to religious and spiritual life, as has become common among sociologists of religion (Dillon, 2003). Likewise, in some instances we speak of both religious and spiritual students in order to more accurately reflect the wide range of individuals who use chaplaincy services.

Drawing from in-depth interviews with 16 campus chaplains, in what follows we highlight the issues that chaplains see as most important to the students they serve. We describe these observations and outline how chaplains conceptualize their central contributions to campus life. We argue that chaplains, particularly those from non-Christian traditions, serve students in ways not previously theorized in the higher education literature. Based on these findings, we conclude with a set of suggestions for student affairs professionals that might enable them to work more collaboratively with chaplains around these issues.

Background

Changes in Religious and Spiritual Life on American Campuses

Since the 1950s, much scholarly work has described the effects of secularization on college and university campuses (e.g., Burtchaell, 1998; Marsden, 1994; Marsden & Longfield, 1992). Scholars have argued that campuses, and their students, are becoming increasingly secular, and that a college education inevitably leads to religious decline in young adults (e.g., Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977; Lehman, 1972). More recent literature, however, has found that the idea that university and college campuses are increasingly secularizing or that they cause students to become less religious is not the whole story (e.g., Cherry

et al., 2001; Finke & Starke, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2013). Much like the general U.S. landscape, college and university campuses are not necessarily becoming more secular but are part of an ever-changing landscape that is becoming more pluralist. In fact, many student religious organizations including Muslim Student Associations, Hillel International, and evangelical parachurch organizations are experiencing growth in student members. Additionally, interfaith initiatives are becoming increasingly common across American campuses (Schmalzbauer & Mahoney, 2018).

All of this is taking place in the context of broad changes in American religious life. The Pew Research Center's (2014) *Religious Landscape Study* shows that the percentage of Americans who identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" has grown from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014. Among young adults in the United States who would be considered the traditional college age (ages 18–29), that number is even greater: 36% in 2014. While 7 in 10 U.S. adults still affiliate with a Christian denomination, this number has declined among a range of demographic groups and especially among young adults. Affiliation with non-Christian traditions has risen slightly but significantly, from 4.7% to 5.9% between 2007 and 2014. Among young adults, 63% still affiliate with a religious tradition of some kind. Approximately 55% identify as Christian, while other religious traditions account for about 8% of young adults. College and university campuses themselves vary significantly in their percentage of affiliated and unaffiliated students, as well in as the composition of different religious traditions that dot their respective landscapes (as exemplified by *The Princeton Review's* [2019] ranking of "least religious" and "most religious" colleges).

Recent research has concluded that modern college and university campuses in the United States look much different than they did historically in regard to religion and spirituality; indeed, they are the most religiously diverse they have ever been (Cooper Nelson, 2013). While recent surveys that address college students' religious identities, beliefs, and practices are not nationally representative, they do provide insight into the diverse religious landscape of higher education. According to one study, for example, just over half of students are worldview majorities (i.e., Christian), a little over a quarter did not identify with any religious institution (they identified as atheist, secular, humanist, and/or spiritual), and 16% were worldview minorities (i.e., religions that are less represented in the U.S., such as Hinduism, Islam, and Native American traditions; Mayhew et al., 2016).

In today's diverse and pluralistic campus environment, many students expect institutions of higher education to support religious and spiritual endeavors, as well as interfaith dialogue. A majority (85%) of students said that it is "important" for campuses to provide a welcoming environment for individuals of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives, and a majority (71%) expected their educational institutions to provide opportunities for them to get to know students of another or no religious tradition (Mayhew et al., 2016). This survey also found that students value interfaith engagement, though their rate of interfaith participation fell behind their attitudes.

These findings underscore the need for colleges and universities to foster inclusive environments for religiously diverse student bodies. In particular, they reveal that students expect their institutions of higher education to provide spiritual and religious care for students from diverse traditions and to facilitate meaningful engagement across religious difference. As Mayhew et al. (2016) noted, campus initiatives designed to foster understanding across difference often emphasize race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity while devoting less attention to worldview diversity. Given the high degree of importance ascribed to worldview diversity by students surveyed in the IDEALS study, Mayhew et al. (2016) encouraged campus leaders to develop both formal programming and informal catalysts to facilitate

conversations around worldview diversity. As student affairs professionals pursue these goals, campus chaplains are a vital resource.

Religion, Spirituality, and Student Affairs

Attention to religion and spirituality by student affairs professionals has been inconsistent historically. In the early stages of student affairs and student development as a profession, spirituality was included in the definition of what it means to care for the whole student. For example, a 1949 publication from the American Council on Education declared that student affairs “must include attention to the students’ well-rounded development—physically, socially, emotionally and *spiritually*, as well as intellectually” (as cited in Temkin & Evans, 1998, p. 61). In the 1960s and ‘70s, spirituality became an increasingly peripheral aspect of student affairs agendas (Collins et al., 1987; Love & Talbot, 1999). A resurgence of student religion and spirituality occurred in the 1980s, and today, once again, some student affairs offices have increasingly focused on the importance of spirituality (typically rather than *religion*) in developing wholly rounded students (Schmalzbauer, 2013). Schmalzbauer (2013) connected growing interest in student spirituality among student affairs professionals to growing numbers of people who identify as “spiritual, but not religious” in the United States.

Recent scholarship highlighted the benefits of nurturing student spirituality on campuses. Astin et al. (2010) defined spirituality in such a way that it is distinct from, yet often overlapping with religion. They stated that spirituality

involves an active quest for answers to life’s “big questions”; a global worldview that transcends ethnocentrism and egocentrism; a sense of caring and compassion for others coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others; and a capacity to maintain one’s sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress. (Astin et al., 2010, p. 137)

Thus, they argued, spiritual development in colleges and universities is “highly compatible with many of the more ‘traditional’ outcomes of higher education, such as academic performance, leadership development, self-esteem, satisfaction with college, and motivation for further education” (Astin et al., 2010, p. 138). The authors suggested that certain practices promote spiritual development, such as study abroad, interdisciplinary studies, service learning, philanthropic giving, interracial interaction, leadership training, and contemplative practices. Student spirituality, broadly defined, is therefore rightly located within the realm of student affairs.

On the ground, however, relationships between student affairs professionals and campus religious leaders can be distant, if not overtly hostile (Glanzer, 2011; Magolda, 2010). In a public university context, Magolda (2010, p. 3) described the relationship between the student affairs staff and an evangelical parachurch group as an “unholy alliance” characterized by a “didn’t ask and didn’t tell” mentality. Arguing that this alliance made each group less effective, Magolda made the case for difference as a starting point for collaboration rather than for estrangement. Responding to Magolda’s argument, Glanzer (2011) pointed out that there are historical, moral, and legal reasons for religious groups and university employees to enter such relationships with caution. Even so, Glanzer agreed that collaborative efforts between campus religious leaders and student affairs professionals can further the goals of each group while benefitting students.

In public institutions, legal concerns can complicate relationships between campus religious leaders and student affairs staff (Craft et al., 2009; Glanzer, 2011; Magolda, 2010). Collaboration between state university

employees and chaplains need not violate the First Amendment so long as neutrality—between religion and nonreligion, as well as between religious traditions—is preserved (Love, 2001; Nord, 2010). Even so, confusion surrounding the concept of the separation of church and state may deter student affairs staff from entering into formal relationships with chaplains. Fearful of litigation, some may prefer to keep religion at arm's length (Burchell, Lee & Olson, 2010; Craft et al., 2009; Magolda, 2010; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Although tensions between evangelical parachurch organizations and university administrators have received attention from scholars (Glanzer, 2011; Magolda, 2010), we know less about the experiences of leaders from other religious traditions and those who are employed by the universities they serve. Indeed, given that parachurch employees comprise only a small number of those who hold the title of chaplain, further research on chaplains and their institutional contexts is needed to better understand the range and effects of different organizational structures (van Stee et al., 2019).

While campus chaplains have rarely been considered student affairs professionals, they have a long history of working with college students. Once dominated by White, ordained men over the age of 40, campus chaplaincy today is becoming an increasingly diverse profession; slowly, colleges and universities are hiring chaplains to match the diversity of their student bodies (Schmalzbauer, 2014). Recognizing the Christian roots of the term “chaplain,” some institutions of higher education have adopted a more religiously neutral title such as “spiritual advisor” in recognition of these leaders’ varied backgrounds.

Chaplains play a variety of roles within the campus communities that they serve. A recent survey of campus chaplains reported that their top five job activities included socializing with students; participating in worship or sacraments; participating in campus-wide ceremonies or rituals; mentoring individuals, providing coaching or spiritual direction; and attending committee or staff meetings (Schmalzbauer, 2014). The most common missions and goals of chaplaincy articulated by the individuals surveyed included those who direct chaplains to “facilitate spiritual formation of students,” “provide worship or sacraments,” “help students integrate faith and learning,” “foster a commitment to social justice,” and “create community that appreciates diversity” (Schmalzbauer, 2014). All of the individuals surveyed were Christian, however, so these reports paint only a partial picture of the landscape.

While Christian chaplains and campus ministers have received scholarly attention from historians and social scientists (Craft et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2014, 2018a), few have examined the roles and experiences of chaplains from other religious traditions (for exceptions, see Khoja-Moolji, 2011; Kowalski & Becker, 2015). As Khoja-Moolji’s (2011) study of Muslim chaplains illustrated, studying chaplains of diverse religious traditions is important because the social contexts in which chaplains work vary considerably across religious traditions. Situating Muslim chaplaincy within the context of the post- 9/11 United States, Khoja-Moolji (2011, p. 18) explained that Muslim chaplains have played a vital role in “humanizing the American Muslim experience” and building bridges between various communities on college and university campuses. As American colleges and universities become increasingly diverse, institutions of higher education will benefit from research that addresses the roles and experiences of campus religious leaders from other minority traditions, such as Buddhist, Hindu, and Humanist chaplains.

Methods

We focus on 16 campus chaplains or those who serve in a similar position (e.g., coordinator for Hindu life, director of religious and spiritual life and contemplative practices) from private and public colleges

Table 1.

Demographics of Campus Chaplains, N = 16

Interview Number	Tradition	Type of Institution	Institutional Religious Affiliation	Size (Carnegie Classification)	Position and Funding
1	Unitarian*	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
2	Hindu	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
3	Buddhist	Private	None	Large	Part-time, volunteer
4	Muslim	Private	None	Medium	Part-time, paid by the university
5	Protestant*	Private	None	Large	Full-time, paid by the university
6	Protestant	Private	Roman Catholic	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
7	Hindu	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
8	Muslim	Public	N/a	Large	Full-time, paid by affiliate
9	Jewish	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by affiliate
10	Roman Catholic*	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
11	Quaker*	Private	None	Large	Full-time, paid by the university
13	Jewish	Private	Roman Catholic	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
14	Humanist	Public	N/a	Large	Part-time, volunteer
16	Muslim	Private	None	Large	Full-time, paid by affiliate
17	Protestant*	Private	None	Medium	Full-time, paid by the university
18	Protestant*	Private	None	Small	Full-time, paid by the university

Note. Interviews 12 and 15 were excluded from our sample because the respondents did not describe themselves as chaplains.

*Asterisk denotes that the respondent was hired to serve an interreligious community rather than students of their own tradition.

and universities on the East Coast. Our sample is not a random sample but rather a convenience sample of chaplains who participated in another, related project about campus chaplains and interfaith work.¹ Some of these chaplains are employed by the universities they serve, while others are paid by external organizations or work in a volunteer capacity. Participants' identities and institutional contexts are summarized in Table 1.

The interview guide, which we developed in conversation with current research on chaplaincy and higher education (e.g., Cherry et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2004; Khoja-Moolji, 2011; Kowalski & Becker, 2015; Schmalzbauer, 2013, 2014, 2018b), is included in the Appendix. In designing this interview guide, we sought to create questions that would help us understand chaplains' roles and institutional contexts. Chaplains were asked about their role on their respective campuses, their training, and how they came to have this profession. They were also asked to describe the role of the campus chaplain, the overall

¹ Chaplains involved in this project participated in retreats designed to provide professional development and cultivate connections among campus chaplains of diverse traditions. While the interview guide (Appendix) includes questions about the first retreat, what took place in the retreat is beyond the scope of this article.

religious and spiritual climate of their campus, the people and organizations with which they work most closely, and the state of interfaith engagement on their respective campuses. One researcher conducted all the interviews. Three interviews were conducted using a video conference software, while the rest were conducted over the phone. The average duration was about one hour, with the shortest interview lasting approximately half an hour and the longest approximately one hour and 40 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and then professionally transcribed.

Informed by the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we worked inductively from the data to generate thematic categories. Using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, the first author conducted an initial round of open coding to identify distinct concepts and categories within the data. In conversation with one another, all three authors worked together through further rounds of coding to refine and specify more detailed codes and identify the major, repeating themes in the data. We then compared these themes with existing literature on religion and spirituality on college and university campuses, chaplaincy, and student affairs work (e.g., Astin et al., 2010; Cherry et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2004; Khoja-Moolji, 2011; Kowalski & Becker, 2015; Mayhew et al., 2016; Rockenbach et al., 2014; Schmalzbauer, 2013, 2014, 2018a, 2018b; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Our analysis revealed the challenges that chaplains perceive among students, as well as the unique strengths and skills that chaplains bring to their campuses. In our review of the scholarly literature, we identified a lack of research on the roles of chaplains from non-Christian traditions, as well as a gap in the conversation between campus chaplains and student affairs. We realized that our data could begin to bridge these gaps by sharing chaplains' insights with a student affairs audience, highlighting the ways chaplains of many traditions understand their central contributions to campus life, and by identifying the potential benefits of greater collaboration between these two groups.

Results

What Are the Most Important Issues Facing Students, Generally?

Mental Health

When asked what they see as the most important issues facing students at their college or university (students, generally—not just religious or spiritual students), chaplains described a variety of individual and societal challenges. Many first responses alluded to mental health issues among college students; for example, one chaplain described “student mental health and stress, and wellbeing” as important issues facing students (Interview 1). Campus chaplains linked mental health conditions to the particular challenges faced by college students, as well as other more general stressors. One chaplain, for example, explained that student mental health issues have “to do with what they’re coping with in their own lives, whether it’s financial hardship, being a first-generation college student, fitting in, being enough, these are all things that are issues we see our students struggle with” (Interview 10). Others cited academic stressors, such as the “competitive environment” of an Ivy League institution (Interview 16) and “the culture of busy-ness where students live by their Google calendars” (Interview 6).

According to the respondents, the contemporary U.S. political and social environment is another source of mental health issues among students. For example, one respondent stated that “a lot of the issues around the Trump presidency is day-in and day-out a huge issue for students” (Interview 17). This chaplain observed that students are “feeling very anxious ... about the direction of, for example, environmental sustainability,

and backing away from the Paris agreement, and [are] really worried about are we even going to have a planet to live on,” while at the same time “the students are studying these things and hoping to be leaders on a lot of the issues that they feel like are being dismantled It’s very, very hard to keep your morale up.” Many chaplains brought up international students affected by the executive order popularly known as the “travel ban.” One respondent noted that international students are “feeling more on edge,” going on to explain that there is “anxiety about whether international students that are at [this university] can stay and all the issues around ... undocumented students” (Interview 17). Social and political tensions around race, religion, and sexuality are also stressors for students, according to many respondents. In general, chaplains agreed that the past year (since Trump’s election) “has been a very rough year” (Interview 17).

Social Justice

A second theme that arose as chaplains talked about the central issues students face was social justice. While many chaplains linked political issues with mental health, they also addressed these issues through the lens of social justice. One chaplain explained

I feel like students are really concerned in general with the nature of the world that we live in today and kind of where they can make a difference to address what really can be kind of daunting and frightening problems. Whether it’s like climate change issues, or inequality, racial inequality, gender inequality, questions of in one sense just how to engage with and uplift a really divided and divisive suffering world. We’re especially seeing that post-election, but I think it was there even before. (Interview 7)

Many chaplain respondents mentioned issues such as privilege, hate crimes, racism, and homophobia. Additionally, they described the ways in which students have organized on their campuses around these issues since the 2016 election.

Community Life

A third theme that emerged was “community life.” The same chaplain who mentioned “the culture of busy-ness” that students experience also stated that students are searching for “community”—and that they do not always know where to find it. Many others shared similar observations. One chaplain said that many students struggle to find their place on campus and cultivate a general “sense of belonging” (Interview 2). Another shared that students on their campus “search and hunger for community” (Interview 11). Yet another respondent observed that students are trying to “figure out how to be in relationship with others” and “actually solidifying a genuine relationship, genuine kind of connection as a human being” (Interview 10). According to this chaplain, students are trying to figure out how “to be a friend in a real way, not in a Facebook way.” Referring to her chaplaincy office, one chaplain explained, “We speak of community quite a lot because people are coming from all over the place into this new [university] space ... [this university] is for everybody, not for certain populations, and that can be hard for some people if they’re first generation college or if their background is what they would consider non-mainstream” (Interview 2).

Which Issues Are Unique to Religious and Spiritual Students?

Navigating a Secular Campus Environment

While chaplain respondents said that their student constituencies face many of the same challenges as the general student body, they also identified issues that specifically impact students of particular traditions.

The first such issue concerns these students' struggles to figure out how to be religious within college or university environments that are widely perceived to be secular. One chaplain, for example, explained that religiously observant students navigate many practical concerns, such as "how do we manage to pray, how do we manage to eat, how do we manage to clothe ourselves, how do we actually just practice our faith in a largely secular environment" (Interview 11). A director of Hindu life at an elite university shared that her Hindu students have a hard time "eating properly," adding that "I make sure that when I do programs I have food and it's food that they like, nourishing food ... and it's all vegetarian" (Interview 2). She also mentioned that Muslim and Hindu students who do not drink can have a hard time fitting into the campus social scene. She explained, "I have students who have said to me 'the chaplain's office provided me with a place where I could be myself and not have to live up to the social expectations' that are broadly defined in [this university's] culture." Describing a coffee house hosted by the chaplain's office every Friday and Saturday night from 7 p.m. to 2 a.m., she said that she envisions this office as a "safe harbor" for students.

Another chaplain described her school as "a very secular university" (Interview 16). According to this chaplain, "while the chaplain's office is a safe zone for all religious traditions ... the rest of the campus is not very hospitable to religion generally." In response to this environment, she says, students—and even faculty—will conceal their religious identities: "I think there may be religions that feel it more, but I think it's across the board ... and it varies more across departments." She explained:

[Students] face within the classroom, you know, hostility towards religion. And yeah. So I mean, there's that. And so what you'll find is also that some people may want to be hiding their religion within the academic space, and that includes faculty I think that there may be religions that may feel it more, but I think it's across the board I think it varies more across departments I think a Muslim student wanting to pray in the engineering faculty will have an easier time than they would in the Mid. Eastern studies or in religious studies. That, you know, some of these different areas that may be actually dealing towards life philosophy, like if you are actually seen as praying, then you may not be seen as objective in your studies and things like that. (Interview 16)

Intra-Religious Differences

"Intra-religious differences" was a second theme that chaplains described as an issue faced by many of their students. While academia is often thought to be secular, student populations tend to be religiously and spiritually diverse. Within these diverse campus environments, conflicts may arise not only between people from different religious backgrounds but also among people who practice the same or a similar religious tradition. Indeed, many campus chaplain respondents reported that religious students often struggle with intra-religious differences. A Jewish chaplain, for example, commented,

I think the intra- stuff, you know, in all religious communities, is very present for all of us. We didn't realize how much it was true for my colleagues in other traditions as well, just how do you negotiate that, how do you form pluralistic communities, how do you keep your community together That may be a number one [issue]. (Interview 13)

A Unitarian Universalist chaplain stated that there are often tensions between "progressive and traditionalist approaches to traditions ... [or] put another way, the progressive or the fundamentalist branches of different traditions" (Interview 1). In society generally, he says, it seems that "fundamentalists' versions of traditions get the most air time." Similarly, a Muslim chaplain described the heterogeneity of the Muslim community on her campus and noted that this intra-religious diversity poses certain challenges. "I think right now the biggest issue is creating a community on campus which embraces all the different ways that Muslims are Muslims,

and just being able to create a pluralist community on campus,” she said (Interview 12). Explaining the “different ways that Muslims are Muslims,” this chaplain described an array of “different political leanings” among Muslim students. Likewise, a Muslim chaplain from a different university noted the vast cultural and ethnic diversity among the Muslim students on her campus (Interview 4). She explained that a significant portion of her programming revolves around bringing “different people together into a room ... [and finding] ways to help that go deeper.” An example of this kind of programming is a storytelling initiative that prompted Muslim students from different backgrounds to talk openly about their ancestry. Describing the storytelling event, this chaplain said that

there’s something about when you’re talking about something as intimate as your family and ancestry, it opens up places that aren’t typically part of conversations it was like this moment of appreciating we’ve got all these enclaves and here we all are sitting in a room together and it made the moment very special.

Finally, a Presbyterian chaplain explained that intra-religious tension often stems from issues concerning representation—in other words, which voices get to speak for a particular tradition. She noted that it is challenging for religious groups on campus to decide “who speaks for the community on a number of issues ... religious communities [are] always going to have a lot of those dynamics at play within them” (Interview 17). This chaplain observed that many differences arise between domestic students and international students, as well as between immigrant communities and those that have been established in the United States for multiple generations. She explained that universities are “a microcosm of what’s happening in the culture ... a college or university setting is a place where you see it much more prominently.” A Catholic chaplain offered an example of Christian groups on her campus that are divided over gay identities. She recalled a time that “one Christian group brought a speaker who was part of the line of thinking that you can pray the gay away, and other Christian groups were upset about it” (Interview 10). This respondent noted that the chaplain’s office’s role in this scenario was to “mediate” so that both sides could communicate effectively.

Searching for Answers in Traditions

Touching on a third theme, many of the campus chaplain respondents observed that religious and spiritual students are seeking to understand the answers that their traditions can offer in the face of contemporary problems in society. Likewise, students want to know how they can apply the insights gleaned from their traditions to their everyday lives. When referring to contemporary problems in society, the chaplains mentioned national and global events including climate change, immigration, and the travel ban. They also spoke of individual challenges, such as mental health issues. One Presbyterian chaplain at a liberal arts college described students’ quests for answers in this way:

[I]n a moment where ... the president of our [U]nited States is executing a travel ban on refugees coming into our country, what is it that our religious traditions have to say about that, that kind of political leadership? How are we to respond in such a moment, and what’s the role that our religious and spiritual community might play in a creative witness. You know, in a moment of impending crisis around questions of climate change, what do our spiritual communities have to offer the debates and activism that people are trying to do in our country and on our campuses now? What’s distinct about what we have to offer? (Interview 18)

As the respondent quoted above explained, campus chaplains see religious and spiritual students attempting to make meaning out of religion and spirituality. Religious communities on campus are, as another chaplain put it,

really challenged by and struggling with how to live out our faith in a way that is relevant, that is meaningful in the world and that's not theoretical and abstract and out of touch with the reality of the world and what is demanded of us. [Referring to engaged Buddhism] all of our religious communities in some ways or another are trying to figure out not just what does it mean to be a member of religion X, but what does engaged religion X look like, what does engaged Hinduism look like, what does engaged Judaism look like. (Interview 7)

What Are the Unique Strengths and Skills That Chaplains Bring to Campus?

Building Bridges

In addition to talking with chaplains about what they see as central issues for students, we asked about their roles and responsibilities, as well as what they uniquely add to campus life. Three roles stood out as common across our sample. First, respondents described one of their most significant roles as “building bridges” across different communities, religious as well as non-religious. One respondent, for example, explained that chaplains at her institution are “here to promote dialogue in the university community” and to “establish relationships with campus partners” (Interview 2). These chaplains are invested in “creating bridges between people, connecting people who belong to different communities.” Another chaplain described his role as “someone who facilitates between different organizations and student groups and getting them plugged into local religious sectors, interacting with interfaith activities around the community, and interacting with different religious groups on campus” (Interview 8).

“Building bridges” can take a variety of forms. For example, a Muslim chaplain explained that she feels it necessary to reach out to different groups when they are somehow affected by Islamic extremism or by someone self-identified as Muslim. She stated that when the Orlando nightclub shooting occurred, she and others wrote letters of solidarity and support to the LGBTQ community and the university (Interview 4). This chaplain explained that she reaches out in this way—that is, she acts as a bridge—so that communities who are affected “understand this is not the intent of Islam at all and that it's a perverse distortion of the religion.”

A Presbyterian chaplain and minister explained why the bridge-building capacity of campus chaplains is so vital to institutions of higher education:

I think that a chaplain really stands in an institution as one of the few people that's a generalist, [we have as] our role bringing together, you know, people who might not talk to each other otherwise. And so in a sense, that becomes a way that we then may be able, are able to not only have people talk to each other in healthy ways, but model a way that is really important for people on this planet to talk to each other and do it in an honest, open, and collaborative way. (Interview 17)

As these examples illustrate, chaplains act as bridge builders on behalf of a variety of individuals and communities. Chaplains build bridges not only between students and religious communities but also among various student groups and different campus departments and between different denominations of the same religion that may be divided by theological or political differences.

Building Community

A second theme related to bridge building was “community building.” Campus chaplains often spoke about “community” in reference to the *lack* of community experienced by students, and when describing students’ “search and hunger” for community during this stage in their life (Interview 11). A Unitarian Universalist chaplain, for example, described “integrated community building,” a role that he believes is

uniquely filled by campus chaplains (Interview 1). He explained that the chaplains' office is a "space for people to really learn the skills of being in community, honing their values, talking about what matters most to them, putting their values into action, being inspired, really wrestling with the hard questions of the time" and forming meaningful relationships with others. Similarly, another chaplain stated that the chaplaincy office at her university offers "a sense of community that is more than sitting in a classroom. It is more than sitting at a social mixer. There is a raw reality that exists in no other kind of space" on campus (Interview 2).

When describing why university and college campuses need chaplains, one Quaker respondent highlighted chaplains' ability to "assist with the work of establishing authentic community" (Interview 11). According to this chaplain, this community-building role includes helping students discover "a vocation or a call, providing values that undergird a desire to build a more just, peaceful, sustainable world." He went on to add that chaplains

give resources for young people, and faculty, and staff for that matter, to survive the violence and vicissitudes of contemporary life ... [which] speaks profoundly to the project of being human and being a human being connected to that which is greater than one's self. It's really education at its most holistic: body, mind, spirit, conscience, commitment.

Additionally, a Jewish chaplain described the community that chaplains build for students as "a sense of connectedness to beyond, like you have a home, you have a spiritual community" (Interview 13).

Chaplains can also play a significant role in strengthening communities that experience marginalization. All three of the Muslim chaplains we interviewed spoke about the challenges confronted by many Muslim students on campus. One chaplain, for example, said that many Muslim students find it difficult to be open about their Muslim identity due to the Islamophobia that they have seen or experienced (Interview 16). Similarly, the Muslim chaplain who spoke about reaching out to communities affected by Islamic extremist groups mentioned that "Muslims themselves have tremendous angst about having to always affirm that Islam is a dignified religion" (Interview 4). While forming bridges between the Muslim community and others on campus is central to this chaplain's role, she also believes that it is important for her to address the needs of her Muslim students:

[chaplaincy allows for] spaces that strengthen and support the Muslim students to keep going on and keep being Muslim and being with other Muslims, even when it's such a targeted identity in many ways, especially the anti-Muslim sentiment that arises around elections. (Interview 4)

While this is just one example of chaplains supporting marginalized students, nearly all campus chaplain respondents spoke to their commitment to helping marginalized communities on their campus.

Tending to the Soul of the University

Third, two chaplains described the campus chaplain's role as tending to the "soul of the university" (Interviews 6 and 10). This means, according to one Protestant chaplain, that campus chaplains ask students

those sets of questions about what it means to be human, who am I, who do I belong to, where do I find meaning, purpose, and value in my life? ... I think there's something essential to what chaplains do to help students to wrestle with these questions. (Interview 6)

In this way, we can understand "tending to the soul of the university" as engaging in work with students around meaning-making, existential questions, and work to help students understand their own ethics and

values. Nearly all respondents described their role in this way, and they emphasized the traditional college years as a particularly formative time in students' lives.

Additionally, a few chaplains discussed the ways in which the “soul” of an institution can (and should) intersect with its academic identity. A Buddhist chaplain, for example, stated that higher education is “not only about academics” (Interview 3). Even in regard to academics, moreover, she asserted that

we need to have the philosophy, the value, we need to have virtue there, so that when students have the power of this knowledge ... we need to guide them to use the knowledge in the right direction, for the right cause.

Similarly, another chaplain explained how important it is that universities tend not only to the academic side but to the whole of a student's formation (Interview 7). Moreover, he asserted that chaplains play a key role in this project. He expressed his conviction that

in the most intimate, personal, emotional, and spiritual ways, there is such a need for people who can help and facilitate the asking of really difficult questions and that kind of level of deeper exploration, in what one of my colleagues likes to call “meaning-making.”

He concluded that “I feel like that's what chaplains do, and I feel like that's what chaplains do incredibly well.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented here illuminate chaplains' perceptions of the important issues on college campuses today, as well as the ways chaplains conceptualize their own contributions to campus life. Describing the issues facing students in general, chaplains from a variety of traditions spoke of challenges related to mental health, social justice, and finding community. According to these respondents, many religious students also face a variety of unique challenges associated with practicing their tradition on campus. These students often struggle to negotiate differences inside and outside of their groups, and to find ways to integrate faith into their campus lives.

In addition to identifying these challenges, chaplains described the unique contributions they believe they bring to their campus communities. These chaplains see themselves as bridge builders and community builders. Their work on campus involves forging connections between students and religious communities, as well as between various religious and nonreligious groups. This work also extends to intra-group relations; chaplains work to facilitate positive relationships between members of the same religious tradition who are divided by theological or political disagreements. For some, community building involves supporting students who experience marginalization. Finally, chaplains conceptualize their role in terms of tending to the “soul of the university” by creating space for students to wrestle with existential questions related to meaning, purpose, and ethics.

These findings further our understanding of the roles clergy play outside of religious institutions, or “on the edge” (Bender et al., 2013). First, many of the roles described by chaplains in this study echo findings from previous research (Craft et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). For example, work around spiritual formation and meaning-making—what we call “tending to the soul of the university”—is widely recognized as a role of chaplains and other campus religious leaders. Schmalzbauer (2014, p. 12) reported, for example, that the four most common goals listed by Christian chaplains included “facilitate the spiritual formation of students” and “help students integrate

faith and learning.” Elsewhere, Schmalzbauer (2018b) noted a growing emphasis on spiritual formation among campus chaplains. Others have described a similar role in more explicitly religious (and Christian) terms (Craft et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004). Our findings suggest that this moral role is experienced not only by Christian chaplains but also those from other traditions.

Other roles emphasized by participants in this study are less present in the literature on campus religious life. The bridge-building capacity of chaplains, for example, was described by many respondents in this study as one of the key skills chaplains bring to campus life. While Davis et al. (2004) and Craft et al. (2009) did not find Christian chaplains and campus ministers acting in this capacity, Schmalzbauer’s (2018b) description of contemporary chaplains acting as “interfaith traffic directors” (i.e., facilitating peaceful cooperation between different religious groups on campus) resembles the interreligious bridge-building described by our respondents. Additionally, Khoja-Moolji (2011, p. 18) observed Muslim chaplains were “building bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims” in ways similar to those described by our Muslim respondents.

While previous studies highlighted evangelism as a top goal among campus religious leaders (Davis et al., 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2018a), our respondents did not describe evangelism as a goal. We see a simple explanation for this difference: Other studies included evangelical Christian leaders, while ours did not. Although the absence of evangelical Christian participants is a limitation of this study, the inclusion of chaplains from non-Christian traditions enables us to examine the experiences of understudied religious groups.

By including Jewish, Hindu, Humanist, and Muslim participants, we gained new insight into the roles of chaplains from traditions not represented in previous studies (Craft et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; Schmalzbauer, 2014). First, we found that chaplains from these traditions were able to call attention to unique challenges facing students who identify with non-Christian traditions. They then described some of the ways they address these challenges on their own campuses by supporting and advocating for their students. These chaplains spoke of student concerns related to dietary restrictions, social expectations, intra-religious difference, and religious prejudice. A director of Hindu life, for example, explained that she always serves vegetarian food at events in order to be sensitive to students’ dietary needs (Interview 2). Likewise, the Friday and Saturday evening coffee house hosted by the chaplains at this respondent’s university provides a welcoming social space for students who do not drink.

While nearly all respondents spoke of supporting marginalized communities on campus in some way, this “community building” role was emphasized by three Muslim chaplains who each described their part in caring for Muslim students (Interviews 4, 8, 16). As one of these respondents put it, the chaplaincy provides “spaces that strengthen and support the Muslim students to keep going on and keep being Muslim and being with other Muslims” despite experiences of hostility (Interview 4). In these responses, we see evidence that chaplains contribute to campus life by supporting and advocating for students from underrepresented religious communities—a role that remains largely unexplored in the literature.

While chaplains have not traditionally been considered student affairs professionals, they have long done student-facing work and can offer insights into students and their needs that may strengthen the work of student affairs professionals. Particularly as student life staff are committed to the care of the “whole” student and are working with students around many of the same issues chaplains name, greater collaboration may strengthen the work of both groups and—most importantly—improve the experiences and outcomes of students across the country (Craft et al., 2009; Magolda, 2010; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Chaplains and student affairs professionals approach student life with different perspectives, skills, and experiences. While both are invested in student well-being, they interact with students in very different ways. As a result, each group is able to offer a unique perspective on student experiences and needs. As the findings from this study illustrate, chaplains are particularly well-positioned to observe the challenges faced by religious students. Additionally, we see that many are already working to improve the experiences and outcomes of students from marginalized communities on campus. Without effective channels of communication, however, chaplains' insights concerning these issues may never reach the university's division of student affairs. Likewise, opportunities for fruitful collaboration may be missed.

We argue that in theorizing new ways that chaplains and student affairs professionals may engage in mutually-beneficial relationships, attention to context is crucial. The nature and outcomes of collaboration between chaplains and student affairs professionals will depend on who the chaplains are and how they are positioned within an institution (Grubbs, 2006; van Stee et al., 2019). In particular, those working in public institutions must be aware of legal constraints and be prepared to respond to concerns about the separation of church and state (Glanzer, 2011; Magolda, 2010; Nord, 2010). Beyond the public/private binary, factors such as institutional size, religious affiliation, location, student demographics, and organizational structure will impact relationships between chaplains and student affairs professionals (Cherry et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2004; van Stee et al., 2019). Chaplains funded by external religious groups, for example, may experience more difficulty than university-employed chaplains in gaining the respect of student affairs staff. These externally funded chaplains may also experience conflict between the priorities of their sponsors and those of other campus leaders. In contrast, chaplains who are hired by the university, employed in a full-time position, and have access to university facilities may find it easier to forge connections with personnel from other departments on campus. We encourage future research that assesses how these and other structural factors enable or constrain effective relationships between chaplains and student affairs personnel (van Stee et al., 2019).

While recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all model for collaboration, based on the findings presented in this article, we encourage the following as steps that might strengthen relationships between chaplains and those working in departments of student affairs. First, we encourage student affairs professionals and chaplains to meet and get to know one another, focusing on their common concern for the students they serve. While members of each group may harbor stereotypes about those in the other, all are ultimately on campus to serve students. Starting—as we did in this article—by talking about the challenges facing students on college campuses today is likely to build common understanding.

Second, in ways appropriate to each institutional context, we encourage chaplains and student affairs professionals to cosponsor events or initiatives and consider creative ways of staffing and supporting students together. Chaplains provide a unique type of care for students that can complement the work of other campus staff, such as residence life personnel and mental health professionals. For this reason, some residential campuses are experimenting with assigning chaplains to dorms, while others have started to assign chaplains to crisis management teams. Working in these spaces, chaplains may be able to offer valuable guidance concerning the challenges faced by the students they serve. Additionally, because many chaplains lead student groups associated with their respective traditions, partnering with chaplains may lead to more diverse attendance and engagement at co-sponsored events.

Third, chaplains are ideally positioned to support campus initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion because they are often already doing this work among religious and spiritual students from diverse backgrounds. The bridge-building capacity that respondents identified as one of their unique

contributions to campus life has long been the work of chaplains, and because most individuals work in professional groups that include people from a range of religious backgrounds, this role is often an integral part of their everyday work.

Finally, we hope this article will encourage collaborative efforts among chaplains, student affairs professionals, and scholars to develop measures for assessing the impact of the partnerships described above. While understanding chaplains' perceptions of students' needs and of their own contributions to campus life are important first steps, we believe that future research should seek to empirically assess the value of campus chaplaincy—including partnerships between chaplains and student affairs professionals—from the perspective of students themselves. Evaluating the successes and failures of these partnerships across a range of institutional settings will enable religious leaders and those working in higher education to provide more effective holistic care for students of diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. Toward this end, we encourage further research that examines the effects of chaplains and student affairs professionals—both individually and in combination—on student outcomes related to learning and well-being.

Funding

This research was supported by a grant from the Luce Fund for Theological Education. Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer of Reconstructionist Rabbinical College serves as principal investigator on this project.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about you

- a. What is your title? What does that involve? Were you hired to serve one specific religious group or were you hired to serve an inter-religious community?
- b. How long have you been in your current position? Are you full or part time? Who pays you?
- c. What relevant training or experience did you have for this position?
- d. How did you come to have this profession?
- e. Tell me what your average day is like?
- f. What do your interactions with students look like?

2. Tell me about chaplaincy at your institution

- a. What do you know about the history of chaplaincy here? What are its main goals?
- b. How many religious professionals are there? Are they full time or part time? Paid or volunteer? What are the roles and responsibilities of the campus chaplains?
- c. What sacred spaces are there on your campus and how are they used?
- d. What people and organizations do you work with most closely on campus? Examples?
- e. What people and organizations on campus would you like to be working more closely with?
- f. Do the chaplains of different religious traditions work together? How often do they work together? Can you give me a specific example of a time they worked together?
- g. If you are hired to serve one religious group: Do you ever serve individuals of religious traditions not your own? Do you participate in interreligious work on campus?

OR

If you are hired to serve the inter-religious community: How would you describe the inter-religious relationships on campus?

- g. Can you think of an example when different faiths came together that was particularly meaningful? What about a time they came together that was more difficult?
- h. Are there certain situations for which you are always called?

3. The campus climate

- a. What are the most important issues facing students on this campus right now? What do you see as the most important issues facing the campus as a whole?
- b. What are the most important issues facing the religious group you serve on your campus?

- c. What would you say is the overall climate, in regard to religion and religious difference on this campus?
 - d. Has your work been influenced in the last few months by the country's political climate?
 - e. Why do campuses most need chaplains – what do you most bring?
4. Now, let's talk about the retreat –
- a. What do you personally hope to get out of the retreat?
 - b. What kinds of interfaith or multifaith experiences would you like to cultivate on your campus?
 - c. Are there ways campus chaplains could better serve the campus as a whole?
5. Is there anything that I have not asked during this interview that I should have?