

Grinnell College
Executive Summary
Timothy Dobe and Caleb Elfenbein

Presenting Focus/Question of the Grant

In the twenty or so years before our grant, the Department of Religious Studies had taken a significant critical turn, largely departing from its history of building inquiry about religion around a model of interfaith exploration and dialogue. What effect has this had on the way that students thought about the department? We wondered whether students, religiously committed or not, thought of the religious studies classroom—and the curriculum animating our work in the classroom—as a space for reflecting on “big questions” in their lives.

Grant Activities

Through our grant activities, we sought to learn more about to what extent our colleagues thought about the religious studies classroom as a space for ethical reflection and exploration, to what extent students in our courses thought about our classrooms in this way, how campus culture around religion might affect the work we do in our classroom, and how in turn this work might be affecting campus culture. To pursue these areas of inquiry, we planned and executed a series of workshops with our colleagues, including a summative event about religion in the Grinnell curriculum with colleagues from across the College; sought to build collaborative relationships with staff educators in religious life; planned and executed a semester-long, six-student research project exploring campus culture concerning religion, complete with public and digital, web-based presentation of findings; and pursued co-teaching opportunities with staff educators in religious life.

What We Learned

Through these activities, we learned that our colleagues in religious studies most definitely consider our classrooms as spaces for reflection about “big questions.” We did find a fair degree of resistance to articulating a department-wide approach to such work, but were heartened by the strong commitment of our colleagues in this area. We also used an end-of-course evaluation to learn more about student experience of the religious studies classroom. Much of what we learned confirmed our colleagues’ understanding of religious studies classrooms as reflective spaces. However, our semester-long research project with students, which included six hour-long focus group sessions, revealed that campus culture concerning religion, which we might generously describe as ambivalence, has a significant effect on the religious studies classroom. That is, students in our focus groups—those with and without particular religious commitments—reported that campus itself was not a space amenable to discussion of religion and religious commitments, and that this manifests in a variety of ways in courses across the curriculum. We now see that greater collaboration with students can produce a thick description of campus culture around religious diversity, producing greater understanding of the anxieties that limit conversation and giving exposure to the vibrant encounters already happening within our community.

We also learned that the critical turn of our department had caused a significant and long-standing rift with staff educators in religious life. This has likely been a contributing factor in the creation of a very real gap between our department and religious life on campus. As a result, we have resolved ourselves to thinking strategically about how we can most effectively engage campus culture around

religion, including but not limited to pursuing co-teaching opportunities with staff in religious and spiritual life. In this vein, we are using the last of our Wabash grant to support a course that brings together religious studies and religious life perspectives in exploring religion and campus culture.

Dissemination

The grant findings are already being shared and will be further disseminated with our college community and beyond in three ways. First, the website and products from the “GRDP” student project are online and have been presented in our college magazine, student presentations to faculty and administration, and in faculty workshops. Second, Caleb and Tim presented on the role of student research in our project findings during the 2016-17 academic year at a faculty workshop on student research, and our assessment visit with Speers and Kahn broadened our collegial conversation to include wider trends in higher education. Third, looking forward to building on Caleb’s co-taught course with our chaplain, he and Tim are starting discussions of a broader range of experimental 2-credit courses integrating cross-campus conversation and “collaborative faculty-student fieldwork” experience on cultures of religious diversity on campus.