

**Teaching Religion at Liberal Arts Colleges:  
Professors and Chaplains Exploring Vocational and Pedagogical Issues.  
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**1. Project Narrative.**

**1a. Project Summary.**

Issues concerning pedagogies of religious studies in undergraduate liberal arts contexts continue to receive significant attention among those interested in teaching and learning. Religion has historically been a core component of the Humanities at small liberal arts colleges, given the latter's historical relationship with Judeo-Christian traditions (Delbanco 2011). As the educational and religious landscape of the United States continues to evolve, one of many challenges for teachers of religious studies in these contexts resides in contestations over course content, method, and interpretive authority, alongside disputed importance in contemporary college curricula, particularly after 9/11 (AAR/Teagle 2008). At the same time, there is sustained interest among student affairs and spiritual life professionals in students' "big questions" about the world (HERI 2008). There appears to be underdeveloped connections around pedagogies of religious studies between classroom teaching and religious life programming, both of which play critical, albeit different, roles in the lives of college students. This project will bring together representatives from these constituencies—chaplains and professors—to develop a framework for collaborative efforts across vocational orientations at liberal arts colleges in the AAR's Southeastern Region. A Regional Development Grant would help create the space and time to consider these issues.

**1b. Project Questions.**

This project aims to consider a number of interrelated questions facing professionals encountering and engaging religion with undergraduate students at small liberal arts colleges, including the following:

- How is "religion" of the academic curriculum connected to "religion" in student affairs—particularly in classroom and religious life settings at liberal arts colleges?
- How might professors and chaplains learn from each other regarding best practices in encounters with the study of religion in such settings? How can we clarify vocational orientations to the material that we share? What are opportunities and challenges emerge from these connections and conversations?
- How might professors and chaplains work together toward less dichotomous understandings of the role religion plays in the lives of emergent adults? How can teaching religion be enhanced through challenging supposed oppositions between "faith" and "intellect"? In the making of community, are such oppositions as stable as students and colleagues tend to assume?
- How might "traditional" materials such as biblical literature, which historically has occupied a central place in liberal arts curricula from a practitioner standpoint (for better or for worse), be best encountered in contemporary liberal arts settings—inside and beyond the classroom—with contemporary students? How might teaching such material take place in ways that encourage critical thinking and nurture the "big questions" recent research (e.g. Astin/Astin 2011) states students are interested in engaging?
- What resources do the specific contexts of small liberal arts colleges offer to teaching religious studies in an integrated manner? Such schools, like Eckerd College, are holistically oriented in teaching and learning, drawing out the potential of "whole students" and challenging boundaries between "academic" and "non-academic" ethos and community formation on campus. How might such an approach serve as a model for similar colleges, if so desired?

**1c. Larger Context of the Project.**

This project seeks to engage the intersections of several movements in literature and practices among higher-educational professionals who engage religious traditions at small liberal arts colleges. Rarely do structured conversations of this type occur in such contexts. Scholars of religion, while highly-trained researchers, tend not to be as well-versed in theories and practices of teaching and learning.

Moreover, scholars of religion are often even less prepared for engaging in pedagogical reflection and action needed in the specific context of liberal education as cultivated and performed at liberal arts colleges—which is the setting in which much of the teaching of religious studies in the United States takes place. Poorly trained professors tend to rehearse oppositions between “church” and “academy” in the classroom, with which contemporary students may or may not resonate. Further, much of the literature on teaching and learning religious studies in liberal arts settings describes tips and techniques or attempts to understand perceived oppositions between “seminary” and “university” models of education, overlooking the specific opportunities and challenges posed by small liberal arts colleges.

Similarly, student affairs professionals, specifically those working with in religious life contexts, face complex issues in their engagements with undergraduates. The literature concerning what might be best called “the spiritual lives of college students” has identified significant gaps in educational practices regarding students’ development as informed, whole people who are adept at asking questions of meaning and purpose in their lives. The “spirituality in higher education” literature has put much of the burden to address these issues on student life professionals, which in turn puts pressure on academics and reinforces an oppositional, dichotomic view of classroom and non-classroom learning, between “faith” and “intellect.” As intentionally residential intellectual communities, though, liberal arts colleges are positioned to challenge such oppositions through articulating frameworks whereby critical engagement of the “big questions” is cultivated in multiple spaces.

Finally, while there is a fair amount of work being done at, by, and for teaching religious studies at liberal arts colleges, underdeveloped is how to foster best practices by bringing together various stakeholders in the teaching of religion in these specific contexts. While any number of stakeholders may be brought together with teachers of religious studies, we aim to highlight connections with chaplains in this project. By bringing these participants together a dialogical workshop setting, we hope that we might articulate a model for engaging religion as a matter of engaging our students critically and holistically toward (their and our) vocational clarity and informed citizenship, and ultimately a transformed and transformative humanity, in the best sense of higher education at small, residential liberal arts colleges.

#### **1d. Project Goals.**

This project has three goals at this juncture:

- *First*, we aim to establish contact in a more concentrated way with chaplains and professors of religion at four small liberal arts institutions in the AAR’s Southeastern Region: Agnes Scott, Davidson, Eckerd, and Rhodes Colleges.
- *Second*, we aim to establish a dialogical framework for reflecting on the vocational orientation of professors and chaplains in these pedagogical contexts, including identifying and exploring vocational aspects that are distinctive alongside those that overlap. Further, we aim to explore how vocational orientation shapes, and is shaped by, pedagogies of religious studies in liberal arts contexts.
- *Third*, we aim to lay the groundwork for future collaboration and development of this project over several years’ time, providing a model through which we will incorporate more schools into this conversation, thereby strengthening local contexts as well as a network for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning religion. An initial meeting at Eckerd College in Spring 2012 garnered much interest in, and desire for, sustaining this kind of project among colleagues in similar institutional contexts. To that end, we shall invite professors and chaplains from at least one small liberal arts college in another region (Austin College, Southwest Region).

## **2. Outline and Design of Activities.**

### **2a. Project Director.**

Davina C. Lopez, Associate Professor and Chair of Religious Studies, Eckerd College

### **2b. Workshop Design.**

The centerpiece of this project will be a two-day workshop to be held at Eckerd College in February 2013, which will allow for conversation between participants to occur on multiple levels across differences on common themes. In advance of the workshop, participants will be instructed to consult materials in a bibliography; their own institutional data on the shape of religious engagement on their campuses; their respective commitments to enhancing religious life on campus; and their institutional rhetoric on pedagogies of religious studies, including the different ways in which “religion” is encountered on their campus (religious studies courses, general education courses, Bible studies, and so on). Breakout and Plenary sessions will include structured dialogue on these materials, exploring reflective responses and encouraging new questions.

### **2c. Proposed Timeline for Project.**

November 2012: Invitations issued
December 2012-January 2013: Travel Plans and Workshop Schedule finalized
February 2013: Workshop held and Feedback gathered
March 2013: Attend SECSOR meeting; complete proposal for AAR Annual Meeting

## **3. Plans for Dissemination.**

I envision the broadest possible audience for the fruits of this project—anyone interested in the future of higher education should ideally be interested in how to foster dialogue about one of the most contentious and misunderstood areas of teaching and learning in religious studies, not to mention the humanities. Realistically speaking, though, our main audience will likely be people “like us”—professors and chaplains—who may work in different capacities with the practices of teaching and learning with respects to religious studies, but who share the pedagogical contexts enabled by small liberal arts colleges. Initial plans for dissemination of this project beyond this workshop include:

- The preparation of a longer-term collaboration over several years, hosted at each participating institution, with invitations issued to other chaplains and professors at small liberal arts colleges;
- The preparation presentations for regional and national AAR meetings during 2013;
- The preparation of at least one co-authored essay, presented as a series of written dialogues between chaplains and professors, for submission to *Teaching Theology and Religion* during 2013-14.

## **4. Itemized Project Budget.**

<u>Transportation Expenses</u>	
Flights: 6 round-trip plane tickets to TPA	\$ --
<u>Lodging and Food</u>	
Lodging: 6 hotel rooms, two nights \$ each plus estimated taxes	\$ --
Food (group meals and hospitality):	
Two lunches --\$ each	\$ --
Two dinners --\$ each	\$ --
<u>Supplies and Incidentals</u>	
Office Supplies (photocopying, folders, name tags) for workshop	\$ --
<b>PROJECT TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ --</b>
<b>Amount requested from AAR</b>	<b>\$ --</b>