A true liberal-arts preparation for global citizenship demands intercultural competence, including knowledge and experience with other languages, cultures, points of views, and, not least, religious traditions.

Colleges and universities should be prepared to help each student seeking a faith, religious, or spiritual community know that his or her community is welcome on the campus, and he or she can connect with others from that tradition.

Boards must be prepared to support the institution’s spiritual and religious life mission, making a commitment to interfaith work if that is part of the institution’s strategic vision.

Over the course of its 125-year history, Elon University has grown from a small college founded by the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the Piedmont of North Carolina to a mid-sized university serving students from all over the nation and globe. It has done so while cultivating a vibrant program of religious and spiritual life for a student body that reflects an increasingly multi-ethnic and religiously diverse culture. How has it managed such a transformation? And what can other institutions learn from it?
An Explosion of Religious Diversity

Elon University’s mission statement calls upon us to attend to the development of the “mind, body, and spirit” of students, emphasizing our commitment to prepare the whole person for a meaningful life of work and service. Today, our student body is nearly 25 percent Roman Catholic and 10 percent Jewish. Every Protestant tradition is represented on campus, alongside Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. In fact, Elon’s fastest growing demographic is “nones” (no, not nuns), but we acknowledge that some of these unaffiliated students are engaged in a spiritual search for meaning and purpose during their university years.

How should colleges and universities prepare to deal with such an explosion of religious diversity on our campuses? Our first response has been to help each student seeking a faith, religious, or spiritual community to: 1) know that his or her community is welcome on campus, and 2) connect with others from that tradition. Using the Catholic tradition as an example, with support from alumni, parents, and friends, the former president’s home was converted to a Catholic Newman Center, housing a peer minister and serving as a focal point of Catholic activity on campus. The local United Church of Christ (UCC) church across the street from campus opens its sanctuary for Mass on a weekly basis; Holt Chapel on campus hosts mid-week Catholic rosary; Mass is held weekly on Fridays in the Numen Lumen sacred space; and a full-time Franciscan priest is an integral member of our religious life staff.

For religious traditions with smaller representations on the campus, we have expanded more gradually, such as employing a part-time Imam to support Muslim students and creating spaces for prayer and ritual ablution. Hindu festivals of Holi and Diwali have become new and welcomed celebrations on the university’s calendar.

Jewish enrollment has grown because of intentional nurturing and support of Jewish life, culture, and religious traditions on the campus, spurred by committed and generous Elon parents. We uphold the flourishing of Jewish life at Elon as an exemplar of how to create and support a vibrant Hillel and a new academic program in Jewish Studies; a mini-case study of this decade-long effort is spotlighted on page 32.

The chaplaincy at Elon has increased from a staff of one full-time person beginning in 1980 (previously it had been a part-time position) to a staff of 17 today, led by the Rev. Dr. Janet F. Fuller, an Episcopal priest raised in Lebanon by Baptist missionary parents and fluent in Arabic.

Interfaith Collaboration and Leadership

How did we get to where we are today? Our community embarked on an ambitious journey toward promoting greater interfaith understanding and cooperation as a part of the university’s strategic plan, the “Elon Commitment.” A confluence of events and long-held institutional values led to this decision.

The first spark of inspiration came in 2003 when alumna Edna Truitt Noiles (’44) and her husband Douglas G. Noiles made a seven-figure endowment gift to create the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life. Their simple and powerful goal was to help students “to learn about their own and other faiths, and to live lives of reconciliation.” Chaplain Emeritus Richard McBride and others began to dream about the construction of a multi-faith center, a building in the heart of campus designed especially to house all Truitt Center staff and intentionally encourage people from all faiths and spiritual traditions to engage and interact with one another. That building, the Numen Lumen Pavilion, was dedicated in spring 2013 as part of the seven-building Academic Village quadrangle, which is dedicated to the arts and sciences and includes Phi Beta Kappa Commons.

One year later, our physical plant set-up crew reports that the Numen Lumen Pavilion is one of the most frequently scheduled buildings on campus. For example, one recent evening the Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Friends
A Founding Vision for the Present Day

Like hundreds of colleges and universities created in the United States in the 19th century, Elon (the Hebrew word for oak) has deep religious roots. Founded 125 years ago by the Christian Church (now part of the United Church of Christ or UCC), a significant part of the college’s early mission was to prepare students, principally from North Carolina and Virginia, for careers as ministers and teachers. Elon’s athletic identity was formerly the Fighting Christians, well understood in the local context amidst Blue Devils and Demon Deacons, but open to much broader misinterpretation as Elon began to draw students from a wider geographic region. (Elon adopted the Phoenix as its mascot in 2000, referencing the institution’s rebuilding following a disastrous fire in 1923.)

Elon’s relationship with the Christian Church and the UCC has been a healthy one. The Christian Church’s emphasis on “freedom of thought and liberty of conscience” provided a good foundation for an academic institution, and the UCC has a long tradition of acceptance and tolerance among Protestant traditions.

Formal governance traditions and ties to the church naturally evolved over time. Mandatory attendance at chapel was eliminated in 1969, although the tradition of weekly chapel services continues to this day. The service is now called Numen Lumen, named for the university’s Latin motto, signifying spiritual and intellectual light. The number of trustees required to be members of the UCC was gradually reduced and the quota was eliminated in 2010 in favor of selecting the most qualified board members, regardless of religious affiliation. Two ex-officio church-related board seats were also phased out in the past decade as ties to the local church conference weakened after many changes in leadership.

Elon faculty members discussed a multitude of strategies to encourage students to pursue the study of international languages beyond the minimum requirement for graduation. Corporate CEOs frequently tell us that the study of world religions is as essential as understanding economics and basic accounting. Our first-rate department of religious studies in the College of Arts and Sciences is an essential asset to this work.

Fourth, our work in promoting interfaith understanding has been influenced profoundly by Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), an international nonprofit whose goal is...
Case Study: Jewish Life at Elon University

How does a Southern school founded by the United Church of Christ and formerly known as the “Fighting Christians” welcome and support a diverse range of religious and cultural groups on campus? The development of Jewish life at Elon University, which has experienced a more than 500 percent increase in its Jewish student population over the past dozen years, presents an instructive case study.

In 1993, Elon had 76 Jewish students and only a handful of Jewish faculty and staff members. At the same time, the original Jewish Students Association (JSA) formed when a small group of students approached Elon’s chaplain about creating a more welcoming environment for Jewish students on campus. Today, in many circles, Elon is referred to as one of the hottest schools in the country for Jewish life, with a program that includes:

- The Sklut Hillel Center, staffed by Hillel Director Nancy Luberoff and Development and Jewish Life Associate Ginny Vellani
- A Jewish studies minor
- Nearly 500 Jewish students and dozens of Jewish faculty and staff.
- This March, Hillel International named Elon first among seven up-and-coming “Seven Stellar Hillels You Haven’t Heard Of.” In fall 2013, Reform Judaism magazine listed Elon among “The Top 20 Small & Mighty Campuses of Excellence.”
- These accolades are the result of a strong institutional commitment to enhance Jewish life at Elon and a coordinated agenda as Jewish students, parents, faculty members, and staff members partnered with university leadership to meet that commitment.

Key Moments in Building the Program

In the early 2000s, the Jewish student population began growing toward a critical mass, with increased campus programming and support from staff and faculty advisors. Fortunately, Hillel International, a multi-faceted organization assisting campuses all over the world, provided Elon with a grant and training in 2005. The partnership with Hillel International, as well as participation in the cohort of “Small and Mighty” schools with small Jewish populations (designated by Hillel’s Foundation for Jewish Campus Life), allowed Elon to better support students and become more strategic and sophisticated in our approaches.

In 2008 and 2010, the university held two “Enhancing Jewish Life at Elon” summits, attended by students, parents, faculty members, staff members, alumni, President Lambert, senior administrators, Hillel International staff, and local Jewish leaders. Direct outcomes of the summits included hiring the first part-time Hillel director, creating the Sklut Hillel Center, a religious.

Preparation for global citizenship demands intercultural competence: knowledge and experience with other languages, cultures, points of views, and religious traditions.

the promotion of interfaith cooperation. Patel is one of the brightest young leaders in our nation today and an articulate champion of interfaith understanding that strengthens American society. Patel wrote, in 2013, “Like Harvard University Professor Diana Eck, I define diversity as simply the fact of people and groups with different identities living in close quarters. Pluralism, according to Eck, is an achievement—it is the proactive engagement of this diversity toward positive ends. My own definition of pluralism has three parts: respect for different identities, positive relationships between diverse communities, and a collaborative commitment to the common good. Diverse societies that achieve pluralism have a strong civic fabric—one that can withstand the provocations of extremists and haters—and bridge their social capital in ways that can take on some of their toughest social problems. But bridges don’t fall from the sky or rise from the ground: People build them. And the people who are on the vanguard of such work, we call leaders.” This work is laying the groundwork for peace in our world, an effort we hope Elon students will contribute to with competency, skill, and deep understanding.
Elon’s work with IFYC has been manifold, including carrying out the work of a Teagle Foundation grant in partnership with Wofford College in South Carolina to assess students’ development in interfaith understanding during the college years. We have also sponsored a “Better Together” living-learning community, where students of different religious and spiritual backgrounds choose to live together intentionally and pursue common community service goals. Elon’s president has also spoken at two White House conferences on faith-based community partnerships at the invitation of IFYC. Most importantly, IFYC has placed Elon within a stimulating community of like-minded institutions, faculty members, staff members, and university presidents.

Considerations for Board Members and Institutional Leaders

Upon reflection, the Elon case study of the metamorphosis of religious and spiritual life on campus holds some important lessons:

1. Change has been constant, intentional, slow-to-moderately paced, and responsive to the changing nature of our students. President Emeritus Dr. J. Fred Young, who served from 1973 to 1998, has reflected that the beginnings of Elon’s well-known program of engaged learning experiences (study abroad, community service, leadership preparation, internships, and undergraduate research, known collectively as the “Elon Experiences”), go back to the 1970s as the university was searching for new ways to deepen student participation in college life and to increase interaction with faculty mentors. President Young saw these experiences as a natural extension of the long-held and cherished universal values of the institution and society,
many rooted in our religious heritage. A strong sense of institutional mission has grounded us through times of change.

2. The board of trustees’ support for the university’s spiritual and religious life mission has been stalwart, including making a commitment to interfaith work a key feature of Elon’s strategic plan. In our experience, fundraising for this mission has few natural constituencies, so many board members stepped up with major financial contributions to complete the building of the Numen Lumen Pavilion. Constant promotion of the “big vision” by the university president to parents, alumni, and other boards and councils of the university has also been important to upholding the importance of interfaith work to our institutional identity.

3. This work must be included in the strategic plan and vision for the university. We have invested in this slowly and systematically over time, always ensuring that support for these initiatives remained a focus for fundraising and endowment building.

4. This work is not easy and requires constant dialogue. Conflicts and tensions are inevitable, and skilled people are required to process these differences in a sophisticated manner. Occasional, senseless acts of hatred or disrespect with roots in religious or cultural identity can and do occur on university campuses, including Elon’s. In such cases, senior administrators, faculty members, and student leaders must respond with a unified voice that such actions are antithetical to our honor code, emphasizing honesty, integrity, responsibility, and respect.

Elon’s interfaith journey has included public discussion and campus dialogue of interfaith issues. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu of South Africa, for instance, served as speaker at a university-wide spring convocation. Two additional spring convocations featured expert panels that directly

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What would our founders think if they stepped back on campus in our 125th year? We believe they would be proud. Elon is in no way a secular institution—we offer prayers before convocations, commencements, and other major campus events, and religious services from many traditions are celebrated across campus on a weekly basis. The campus hosts a vibrant program of religious and spiritual life, and true to the values of our founders, we are carrying through on three essential promises: 1) allowing each person to follow his or her tradition and “exercise freedom of thought and liberty of conscience” with regard to religious practice, 2) nurturing a university community that prides itself on respectful dialogue and mutual support across differences, and 3) perhaps most important for a liberal-arts institution, encouraging students to gain both knowledge and experience with respect to world religions, which are essential to effective modern citizenship. Graduating students with the skills and knowledge to build bridges around the world is a direct extension of our founders’ vision and one of the most important responsibilities of 21st-century institutions of higher education.

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