

Campus Conversation: Multifaith Strategic Planning

The Boldly Elon strategic plan seeks to “create structures and learning opportunities that engage all students, faculty, and staff in advancing their intercultural and multifaith learning and competencies,” “strengthen support networks dedicated to the success of historically marginalized groups and increase representation from underrepresented groups,” and “ensure that graduates are creative, culturally agile, ethically grounded, and well-prepared to address questions of societal importance.” Building on these goals, **Elon’s Multifaith Strategic Planning Committee has been charged to develop a new five-year multifaith plan that will:**

1. make Elon a more religiously diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus and community
2. support opportunities for multifaith engagement for all members of the Elon academic community (regardless of their spiritual, religious or secular identity, tradition, or worldview), including:
 - a) the development of knowledge and skills for navigating local and global intercultural and multireligious contexts
 - b) spiritual formation and the expression of religious, spiritual, and secular identities, values, and practices (defined in broad, inclusive, and intersectional terms)
 - c) the examination of the historical, political, legal, economic, social, cultural, and artistic significance of that which can be categorized as “religious” or “spiritual”
 - d) disciplinary and interdisciplinary research and scholarship on religion
 - e) experiential and engaged learning about religion
3. engage an expanded circle of stakeholders among students, faculty, and staff across Elon’s campus and delegate responsibility for the success of the plan
4. articulate the value and importance of multifaith learning for all constituents, including prospective and current students and parents, faculty and staff, and our broader local, national and international audiences

During the Fall 2021 semester, the committee conducted an environmental scan of related campus resources and existing data, identified schools for benchmarking purposes, and administered campus-wide surveys to understand better the experiences and the religious, spiritual, secular, ethical, and cultural identities of faculty and staff.

Our survey data on questions of identity and connections indicated that:

- Elon’s population is overwhelmingly Christian, with sizable populations who identify as Spiritual but not Religious, Agnostic, Atheist, Secular, and Jewish.
- More than half (55%) of students report that their religious, spiritual, secular identities are moderately to extremely important to them.
- Among student and employee survey respondents, off-campus spaces were the most cited source of religious/spiritual/secular connections; and a fair number of respondents see no particular spaces or programs that provide sources of connection.

Our survey data on questions of climate, bias, and suggestions for improvement indicated that:

- When asked about bias at Elon, concerns about antisemitism were overwhelmingly the top area of concern for survey respondents.
- Anti-Muslim bias and ignorance of Islam were also areas of concern, but these were reported twice as frequently by faculty and staff as students.
- Experiences of religious/spiritual/secular bias are most likely to occur either online or in person in settings outside of class.
- There are strong differences of opinion among employees as to whether Elon's climate is characterized more by Christian privilege or anti-Christian bias; by contrast, few students see any anti-Christian bias on campus.
- Christian students report especially high levels of belonging, welcome, inclusion, safety, and feeling understood in relation to their religious identities.
- The students who feel the least welcome, included, understood, and safe (in relation to their religious/spiritual/secular identities) include a disproportionate number of students from minoritized religious groups.
- According to qualitative survey data, there is widespread support across campus for improving the experiences of minoritized religious populations at Elon.
- Survey respondents among students and employees indicate interest in more opportunities (or requirements) to learn about religion.

Our scan of campus and benchmarking exercises revealed that:

- Many areas of campus do not reflect a consideration of religious/spiritual/secular identity when considering issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Elon's co-curricular programs parallel those of leading schools with a couple of gaps (for example, programming around race and religion, Black religion, and harms caused by religion).
- While Elon has excellent academic programs for the study of religion, there are significant areas for potential growth, including within the Religious Studies department (whose dependence on part-time faculty and need for full-time faculty in Religion and Race is noteworthy) and within professional schools.
- One significant area where Elon does not lead is in the examination of the intersections of race, religion, identity, and spirituality.
- Elon is less religiously diverse than many other institutions at which we looked for benchmarking purposes.