

THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY ON A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

By *Bonnie Glass-Coffin*

Abstract

We live in an era where xenophobia, Islamophobia, and dangerous “Othering” is gaining ground in our communities. If anthropology’s purpose still is, as Ruth Benedict once said, “to make the world safe for human differences,” it is more important now than ever for colleges and universities to provide our students with the necessary tools to do so. This report documents how a new initiative is building capacity for positive interaction among all who orient around religion differently while building bridges of interfaith cooperation at Utah State University. After summarizing campus climate research that led to the initiative’s emergence in 2014, this report summarizes some of the major changes on campus that have come about as a result of these efforts. It then discusses the pros and cons of implementing positive institutional change from the “bottom-up” versus “top-down.” It concludes by asserting that we need applied and engaged anthropology in higher education now, more than ever, to prepare our students for the challenges of living and working in the 21st century.

Key words: diversity, higher education, evaluation, interfaith

Introduction

With almost 900 hate crimes reported in the ten days after our most recent Presidential election, promoting and protecting diversity on college campuses has become more important than ever (Southern Poverty Law Center 2016; Westcott 2016).

Applied anthropology is a crucial tool in this ongoing work.

On our public university campus, the Utah State University (USU) Interfaith Initiative and its affiliate, the USU Interfaith Student Association, seek to inoculate against the kind of hate described in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s grim report—hate which is grounded in both fear and ignorance. Our efforts focus on “creating positive and meaningful interaction among people who orient around religion differently” by providing “safe spaces to voice our beliefs and values, by teaching skills for interacting with respect and appreciation across ‘faith-divides,’ and by coming together to serve the common good.”¹ Our work builds bridges of relationship, appreciation, and common ground among groups who view themselves as different while bringing members of our campus community together to share authentically, engage respectfully, and to work together on common problems. We do this work because we know that it is more difficult to objectify those who may look or believe differently than we do when we know who they are, what they stand for, and why they suffer.

Background to the Emergence of the USU Interfaith Initiative

This initiative emerged from recent participatory, anthropological, campus climate research that invited students, administrators, faculty, and staff to share if they felt “safe” expressing their religious/spiritual commitments (or lack thereof) in and out of the classroom and whether they thought it was important to be able to do so. As I have reported elsewhere (Glass-Coffin 2016), data collected during four round table discussions with sixty-five participants and follow-up ethnographic interviews with forty-eight students revealed what we already suspected: most respondents felt that these kinds of conversations are vitally important to the health of our

campus. Silence about such an important aspect of personal identity, they asserted, leads to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and disempowerment. However, most respondents *also* reported that they were reluctant to engage in these discussions because they were afraid they would be stereotyped, misunderstood, and vulnerable to micro-aggressions if they did.

Our research focused on assessing needs and identifying stakeholder assets. It produced specific action items for facilitating change in three broad areas. First, because ours is a single-faith-dominant campus where most incoming students have had little extended interaction with those of other faiths,² respondents told us they desired programs and events to increase their religious literacy (both in terms of religious traditions and in terms of how these impact adherents’ lives). Suggestions for change were both curricular and extra-curricular. Some of these included a university-required class in world religions, a course sequence (leading to a certificate or to a minor) that would encourage interfaith literacy and teach the skills necessary for promoting interfaith cooperation, guest lectures, reading groups and informal “brown-bag” conversations, new-student and new-faculty orientations about our specific campus climate, service learning opportunities, religious diversity trainings, the creation of a library archive of diverse “faith-stories,” round table and “speed-faithing” (like speed-dating) discussions among students of multiple faiths, site visits to churches and other places where people of different faith traditions congregate, and the creation of a community-wide directory that would connect students to religious resources. Additional suggestions included creating spaces within the university that would provide opportunities for sustained interaction among people of differing world-views, the creation of an interfaith student club, and creation of interfaith suites in the residence halls.

Second, the research participants wanted more institutional commitment to religious pluralism and diversity. Ideas for how to accomplish this desire included amending the portion of the university mission statement that addresses diversity to include explicit mention of religious diversity, expanding both the mission and capacity of our university diversity office to name religion as a specific “inclusion” category and to create a staff position to help promote religious inclusion, highlighting university support for religious diversity as an aspect of international student recruiting and retention, creating a new university-wide award for employees who champion respect for religious diversity, recognizing the importance of promoting/protecting religious diversity as part of the faculty tenure and promotion process, and providing monetary support for coordinating programming that supports interfaith cooperation.

Finally, the round table discussions discussed ways in which extant religious and spiritual resources might be made more well-known on campus. Ideas included creating a calendar of religious events and providing links to community religious resources on the USU home page, providing a highly accessible space for reflection/meditation and/or daily prayer, providing and promoting *halal* and *kosher* food options in the cafeterias, and creating a campus ministry program.

How the Research Has Been Implemented to Improve Campus Climate

Many of these suggestions have, in fact, been instituted over the last two and a half years as a result of grassroots efforts on the part of many who participated in these initial round table discussions and follow-up ethnographic interviews. The institutionalization of both the Interfaith Student Association³ and the formalization of a campus-wide Interfaith Advisory Council with participation by staff, faculty, upper administration, students, the LDS Institute, and other community faith leaders⁴ has made it possible to coordinate activities and programs and to maintain one another “in-the-loop” as we continue to leverage the talents and interests of multiple stakeholders on and off campus.

In terms of curricular revisions, we recently secured a small grant from the Interfaith Youth Core and the Teagle Foundation to develop an Interfaith Studies Certificate that will provide undergraduate students in any major with the opportunity to gain both classroom-based knowledge and experience-based skills that will help them more effectively navigate the complexities of a world that is rife with religious conflict. Support for religious diversity has been added to both the mission and staffing capacity of our campus’s Access and Diversity Center. We have opened an interfaith prayer/reflection room in our Office of Global Engagement. We have institutionalized a three-hour stand-alone “Better Together Interfaith Ally Training” program to build capacity for authentic sharing of religious/non-religious identities, appreciation of religious difference, and awareness of religious privilege on campus. To date, more than 170 students, faculty, administrators, and staff have participated in these trainings. “Better Together” stickers are sharing coveted space on faculty/administrator doorways with LGBTQ “Ally” stickers. We are currently scaling-up the Better Together training and will present it as part of a student interfaith leadership weekend that we will host on campus next spring. This “Interfaith Leadership Lab” will bring 200 student-participants and faculty allies from at least five college and university campuses throughout Utah and Southern Idaho to our campus to build capacity and to expand interfaith alliances throughout our region.

Coverage of our work in local, regional, and even national media has grown exponentially over the last two and a half years. While we haven’t yet formalized a campus ministry program that would bridge “town and gown,” support for this effort has grown considerably among upper administration and faculty in the last two years as a spate of suicides and other mental health concerns have pierced the lives of too many in our campus community. As national and local rhetoric⁵ continues to divide straight from gay, native from immigrant, Christian from post-Christian, the USU Interfaith Initiative has been able to gain ground with faculty and administrators who were, at first, quite skeptical. We have been able to educate faculty and administrators about the importance of supporting a student-driven

quest for meaning and connection on even public university campuses like ours [cf Astin, Astin and Lindolm 2010; Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2012; and Parks 2011]. Our work has been recognized by Deans and Department Heads, teaching faculty and student-services staff, as all have come to realize both the market potential of an avowedly inclusive campus and the way that interfaith organizing positively impacts quality of life for our students.

Throughout all these advances, our Interfaith Student Association has been especially active in building a culture of religious literacy and appreciation for diversity. They have hosted speed-faithing events, round table discussions, site visits to area churches, interfaith movie nights, and informal potlucks. These students have also represented USU at interfaith Thanksgiving Services, at rallies in support of our local Muslim community, and at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in October of 2015.

As I look at other models for promoting grassroots initiatives on campus (Antal 2010; Kezar, Gallant, and Lester 2011; and Weber, Bookhart and Newman 2009), I realize that we have done many things right. We have leveraged course content, fostered intellectual conversations, built networks, obtained grants to legitimize our efforts, mentored and mobilized students, partnered with multiple stakeholders, taken advantage of professional development opportunities, and grounded our work in the context of our institutional culture (Kezar, Gallant and Lester 2011).

“Top-Down” Versus “Bottom-Up” Approaches: Advantages and Disadvantages of the Model

The advantages of building a movement from the bottom-up have included being able to leverage stakeholder assets and resources more effectively than if the move to formalize interfaith cooperation had been initiated by our university’s upper administration. The fact that our initial round table discussions included a library archivist, several vice presidents and vice provosts, the director of our international student office, the director of our diversity and inclusion center, and multiple faculty and students dedicated to improving our campus climate has helped these efforts

to grow all across our campus. However, there have also been challenges with the “bottom-up” model that emerged from our initial engaged anthropological research that continue to stymie our growth.

One disadvantage of the “grassroots” approach has been the difficulty in coordinating between the multiple departments and units involved in our efforts. Because the interfaith initiative grew in direct relationship to the human and economic resources each of the initial stakeholders was able to bring to the process, it has not been the case that these units and departments share a unified vision or set of goals. Since the student association sits on the student services side of campus (in the Center for Access and Diversity), while the Interfaith Initiative is firmly rooted in two academic programs (Anthropology and Religious Studies), there is not always good alignment between what the *students* see as their mission and/or vision and how faculty prioritize action plans to further institutionalize interfaith cooperation on campus.

Another challenge to the movement has been the difficulty encountered by Interfaith Advisory Council members in capturing the imagination of the university president and provost. This may be due, in part, to the ever-increasing demands placed on upper administrators and the lack of time they have at their disposal to champion a cause they may not fully understand, or that they may not see as a priority, when faced with competing priorities imposed from stakeholders beyond our campus community.

As a result, the budget available to run our USU Interfaith Initiative continues to come exclusively from grant dollars and from discreet “asks” for specific events and activities. There is no university-recognized budget line to support our work. But, because those of us most invested in the work of the initiative have no buyout from our other role assignments to spend time writing grants or promoting our efforts to potential donors, it is difficult to grow the initiative beyond its current state. Any increase in the initiative’s influence and visibility on campus have come at great cost to advancing more traditional research and publishing time demands.

Top administrators on our campus, while expressing positive interest in the

initiative when we have made the news or won awards or grants, more often ignore, dismiss, or distance themselves from the nuts and bolts of this work. This may be, in part, due to their increased pressures to keep the University’s bottom line firmly in view, as state allocations for public universities continue to shrink. Competing demands on administrator time and focus have also come as upper-level administrators navigate Title IX reporting requirements and occasional violations. The goals and resource needs of the Interfaith Initiative may be seen as intrusive or even frivolous in the wake of such pressing demands.

Finally, the conservative turn in American politics—particularly with regard to “religious freedoms” rhetoric—has definitely hampered our ability to enlist top university officials in Utah as stakeholders in this movement. Our interfaith work embraces religious and cultural pluralism explicitly, but this is not always welcome here in Utah. As one university administrator told me during the first year of the initiative, “I’ve worked hard to teach my children *specific* Christian values, and I know that other parents who choose USU over other institutions do so because they feel the same way. I’m not sure that I would *want* my children to engage in conversations where there may be more than one definition of “right” and “wrong” as it relates to the sanctity of marriage, abortion, and other *specific* Christian values.”

There are certainly “trade-offs” in the bottom-up and the top-down approaches to effecting positive social and educational change on campus—especially in a politically conservative state like Utah. In its commitment to protect and promote diversity, the grassroots approach taken by the USU Interfaith Initiative has, by its very nature, encouraged a diversity of thought and action that would have been stifled with a more top-down approach to our efforts. But, effective implementation of the initiative has also been hampered by the lack of a unified message and the “blessing” of top-level endorsement and support.

Next Steps

Some next steps to counter the obstacles faced in the first years of this initiative include the following: We must better

coordinate and more effectively communicate the benefits of initiatives like this one to upper-level university administrators. Similarly, we must continue to find ways to secure more outside funding. Having more “publically visible” endorsements from high-profile public figures would most certainly increase our legitimacy on campus and catch the attention of our upper-most officials. We should also continue to leverage curricula so students who have interacted with our programs and activities become our champions. We will need to develop accurate assessments of the positive impact of the initiative on student learning outcomes, on job placements, on student recruitment, and on retention to show the value-added potential of this work. Then, we must use these measures to demonstrate how support of this initiative increases institutional prestige. All along the way, we must continue to build networks and engage stakeholders.

There is much work ahead of us, yet in the weeks since November’s presidential election, the urgency of this work has never been more apparent. As we move forward, we do so with a growing number of lessons learned. These include knowing and understanding our local and institutional cultures, leveraging our gains according to institutional priorities, and letting our successes carry our messages. Similarly, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of developing and continuing to cultivate a robust set of stakeholders as allies, and of being willing to regroup as necessary and to be maximally flexible, in the face of change. Having a grand vision has guided us from the beginning, while cultivating patience and a willingness to limit our expectations for immediate change has kept us feeling positive, even as we have struggled to find ways forward. As President Teddy Roosevelt once said, “We try to cultivate the attitude that we must do what we can, with what we have, where we are at.” This, more than anything, continues to help us keep hope alive in these very troubled times.

Applied Anthropology in Higher Education: Now More Than Ever

The common ground that our students find through the work we do with the

USU Interfaith Initiative is rooted in the deepest and oldest traditions of anthropological theory and method. To honor and affirm diversity, to learn from one another, to observe carefully and listen deeply—these are the foundations upon which our discipline emerged and upon which it will continue to flourish. The USU Interfaith Initiative also echoes the most important message of applied and action-oriented anthropology—that academic inquiry and public action are *not* mutually exclusive. In promoting positive relationships among people who orient around religion differently, the USU Interfaith Initiative reminds us of anthropology's particular relevance. As we face an uncertain national future where diversity is more feared than celebrated by some of our highest and most powerful elected officials, efforts like the USU Interfaith Initiative are empowering our students and providing them with the tools, as Margaret Mead once affirmed, to become thoughtful, committed citizens. This work gives those of us who are stakeholders in the USU Interfaith Initiative hope as we see our students rise to the challenge of promoting and protecting diversity on our campus. As an engaged anthropologist and activist, it gives me hope personally to see how the USU Interfaith Initiative is preparing my students, who are the citizens of tomorrow, to become among those thoughtful few who, as Margaret Mead best expressed it, may just change the whole world.

Notes

¹Text is taken from the “We Are Better Together” postcard created for distribution at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Salt Lake City, October 2015.

²When asked about their current religious or nonreligious perspective, incoming freshmen who were surveyed as part of the nationwide IDEALS (2015) survey responded that they most closely identified with the following descriptors: 70.3 percent Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 percent other Christian, 2.3 percent (all other religions), 3.6 percent (spiritual or other worldview), and 17 percent as either Agnostic, Atheist, Nonreligious, or

“None.” In this same report, we also asked how many respondents had lived for more than twelve months or more of their lives in a region where the predominant religion was different than their own. Surprisingly, only 30 percent responded in the affirmative (<http://interfaith.usu.edu/files/Utah%20State%20University.pdf>)

³<http://accesscenter.usu.edu/clubs/interfaith/index>

⁴<http://interfaith.usu.edu/about/team/advisorycouncil>

⁵The LDS stance on marriage equality, for instance, has been incredibly divisive on our campus and in our community.

References Cited

Antal, Miklós

2010 Applications for Official Support: An Innovative Way to Promote Grassroots Initiatives. URL:<http://www.innovation.cc/scholarly-style/mike_antal6applications6final.pdf> (March 20, 2016).

Astin, Alexander, W., Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm

2010 Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Glass-Coffin, Bonnie

2016 Building Capacity and Transforming Lives: Anthropology Undergraduates and Religious Campus-Climate Research on a Public University Campus. *Annals of Anthropological Practice* 40(2):258-269.

Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS)

2015 Time I Technical Report Prepared for Utah State University. Unpublished manuscript. Author’s files.

Jacobsen, Rhonda Hustedt, and Douglas Jacobsen

2012 No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Kezar, Adrianna, Tricia Bertram Gallant, and Jaime Lester

2011 Everyday People Making a Difference on College Campuses: The Tempered Grassroots Leadership of Faculty and Staff. URL:<<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cshe20>> (March 20, 2016).

Parks, Susan Daloz

2011 Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Southern Poverty Law Center

2016 Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election. URL:<<https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election#pdf>> .

Weber, Shana, Davis Bookhart, and Julie Newman

2009 Institutionalizing Campus Wide Sustainability: A Programmatic Approach. URL:<[http://sustainability.jhu.edu/office_of_sustainability/reports_and_publications/Journal Institutionalize Article.pdf](http://sustainability.jhu.edu/office_of_sustainability/reports_and_publications/Journal%20Institutionalize%20Article.pdf)> (March 20, 2016).

Westcott, Lucy

2016 Since Trump Election, U.S. Has Seen Nearly 900 Hate Incidents: Report. URL:<<http://www.newsweek.com/hate-incidents-trump-election-southern-poverty-law-center-526511>>.

Bonnie Glass-Coffin

(bonnie.glasscoffin@usu.edu) is both Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies Affiliate Professor at Utah State University and an advocate for the role of engaged and applied anthropology in higher education. She recently founded the USU Interfaith Initiative (<http://interfaith.usu.edu>) to implement recommendations from a campus climate research she co-facilitated in 2014. The changes that have been implemented to date have made USU a more inclusive and welcoming place for all. ■

