Undergraduate Learning and Interreligious Understanding at Georgetown University
The Doyle Engaging Difference Program is a campus-wide collaboration between the Berkley Center and the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS) to strengthen Georgetown University’s core commitment to tolerance and diversity and to enhance global awareness of the challenges and opportunities of an era of increasing interconnectedness. Doyle faculty fellowships support the redesign of lower-level courses to incorporate themes of cultural, religious, and other forms of difference, while Doyle Seminars facilitate in-depth explorations of similar themes in smaller, upper-level courses. In addition to curricular innovation, the Doyle Program supports the Junior Year Abroad Network, through which Hoyas blog about their encounters with diverse host societies, and Doyle student fellows, who engage intercultural and interreligious dialogue on campus. The program is made possible through the generosity of William Doyle (C’72), a member of the Georgetown University Board of Directors.

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

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What knowledge do undergraduates have of diverse religious traditions? How open are they to engaging with the religious traditions of others? And how does the undergraduate experience—inside and outside the classroom—shape patterns of interreligious understanding over time? Two research centers at Georgetown University—the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)—carried out a four-year longitudinal study to address these basic questions. As a Catholic and Jesuit institution, Georgetown University seeks to promote knowledge of, and dialogue among, diverse faith communities. The multi-year study has deepened our knowledge about connections between undergraduate learning and interreligious understanding—knowledge that will help faculty and administrators design curricula and structure student life more effectively. The results of this study are also germane to the wider societal debate about education and education policy in an era of growing religious and cultural pluralism, both nationally and internationally.

To establish a baseline at the beginning of the study, we developed an initial survey to evaluate incoming undergraduates’ religious profiles and attitudes toward other religions. In Fall 2007, CNDLS administered the survey online to the incoming first-year class, receiving some 460 responses. A detailed analysis of our findings from that survey comprises the bulk of the Report of the Fall 2007 Survey of First-years, released by the Berkley Center in spring 2008. In order to document this cohort’s transitions in interreligious understanding as they progressed through their undergraduate experience at Georgetown, over the next four years we gathered supplementary data from a variety of qualitative approaches, including seven focus groups, 40 individual student interviews, and written reflection papers from eight students who had participated in multiple study components. In the final semester of the study (spring 2011), an online exit survey was administered to the original 460 students who had responded to the initial survey in 2007. The qualitative data collected throughout the four years of the study was used to triangulate and illuminate responses from the initial and exit surveys.
Major findings from the study included:

- Personal interactions appeared to be most significant in encouraging cultural understanding, followed by classroom experiences and the diverse campus environment.
- Increased knowledge of other religions or cultures, in and of itself, can increase students’ interreligious or intercultural understanding.
- Direct, personal experience with another faith or its adherents positively affects students’ interreligious understanding, whether through friendships with those of another faith, attendance at services, or during discussions in or out of the classroom.
- The combination of academic study and personal experiences with those of other faiths or cultures (friendships, campus activities, study abroad, etc.) appeared to be most effective in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding.
- As students gained a stronger sense of self and grew more comfortable with their own identities they were able to interact more effectively and compassionately with people who differed from themselves in significant ways.

Regardless of their belief system, as students grew more comfortable with their identities—whether religious, atheist, gay, straight, black, Asian, poor, mixed-race, etc.—they gained a stronger sense of self and became able to communicate more effectively and generously with people different from themselves. Thus one of the significant findings of this study was that as students learned to become more comfortable with their own ideas, thoughts, and beliefs, they also grew more open and tolerant of others.

Moreover, the study found that the influence of contact with those of similar or divergent belief systems depended upon the extent to which students were either confirmed in their own religious beliefs or open to learning about the beliefs of others. Students whose religious beliefs or identities were less fixed were more open to multiple perspectives, while students who were more certain of their beliefs were less likely to be influenced by such exposure.

Finally, Georgetown’s Catholic and Jesuit heritage played an important role in facilitating cultural understanding and interreligious dialogue. Almost all students responded positively to values such as social justice, intellectual curiosity, cura personalis, and valuing cultural differences. For many non-Catholic students, including those who self-identified as atheists, the idea of educating the whole person meant they were able to explore their own and others’ beliefs in an atmosphere of openness, tolerance, and acceptance.

In summary, then, our findings revealed that while in general, the basic religious beliefs of students did not change substantially during college, their attitudes towards those of other faiths became more open and accepting. Thus it appears that for many students, their religious beliefs—or lack of them—solidified, leaving them less likely to look beyond their own belief systems for answers to life’s questions. Increased confidence in their own values and identities allowed them to interact with more respect and understanding with those from another perspective or background.
This longitudinal study evaluated the common assumption that students expand their interreligious understanding and tolerance over the course of their undergraduate education. The four-year project tracked the development of religious attitudes and interreligious understanding of students in the Class of 2011 during their tenure at Georgetown University.

First, we collected attitudinal data to gain insight into the opinions and beliefs of students as they entered Georgetown. What knowledge do undergraduates have of diverse religious traditions? How open are they to engaging with the religious traditions of others? And how does the undergraduate experience—inside and outside the classroom—shape patterns of interreligious understanding over time?

Second, we investigated the primary factors that appeared to influence interreligious understanding. What do students report about additional changes, and what is the extent of those? What do students consider the primary influences upon shifts in attitude and knowledge? Are the primary influences curricular, social, relational, or some combination or set of causes?

The goals of this research project are significant to the institutional mission of Georgetown University, whose Catholic and Jesuit heritage embraces the advancement of interreligious understanding on campus, in the community, and beyond. One of the objectives of our research was to identify those aspects of the comprehensive undergraduate experience most likely to promote and encourage interreligious engagement, tolerance, and understanding. Through this study, we aim to contribute knowledge that will inform and shape strategies at Georgetown, and are adaptable to other academic contexts, for increasing interreligious knowledge and understanding.

Further, the study has deepened our awareness of the complex interconnections between undergraduate learning, student life, and interreligious understanding. We hope this knowledge can help faculty and administrators at Georgetown University and beyond to re-design curricula and structure student life to more effectively support the development of interreligious and intercultural understanding. The results of the study are also germane to the wider societal debate about education and policy in an era of growing religious and cultural pluralism, both nationally and internationally. This study was conducted using a multi-method research design.

An initial survey was administered to 1,634 students entering Georgetown at the start of the 2007-08 academic year; 460 students completed the online survey. With this baseline established, changes in interreligious understanding and knowledge over the course of the subsequent academic terms were assessed through focus groups and individual interviews, described below. Of the 460 initial survey respondents, 64 percent indicated a willingness to participate in subsequent study activities. An online exit survey administered to the original group of 460 students in their final semester (Spring 2011) served as a bookend to the study and allowed us to compare first and fourth-year student attitudes.

While we initially planned a four-year study to follow a cohort of students through their entire undergraduate career, we envisioned the project as an expanded case study of the Class of 2011 as a whole rather than as a longitudinal study of individual students. We aimed to obtain a fluid sample of approximately 100 students. However, the response to the initial survey exceeded our expectations. It was from this cohort of 291 that we drew most of the focus group participants, interviewees, and students selected to write reflection papers.

Nonetheless, in order to broaden our perspective on the experiences of students in the Class of 2011 even further, we opened the focus groups to the larger group of 460 initial survey respondents in the third and fourth years of the study. Even though these students originally had not volunteered to continue in the study, we received a positive response from the group as a whole, and in fact added a second focus group in the fall of 2010 in order to accommodate those additional students.

Although it was not possible to carry out a longitudinal study with a clearly defined set of individual students, then, we deemed...
it an asset to approach the research questions from multiple perspectives involved in large-scale surveys, small focus groups, and individual interviews. Gathering evidence of change using methods from macro to micro levels enabled us to observe, categorize, and interpret student responses and behaviors from varied, yet systematic, points of view. As we expected student perceptions to change over the four years of the study, we sought to gain a clearer understanding by keeping our data collection approaches similarly fluid.

The following sections of this report first summarize the findings of the 2007 initial survey and then describe and analyze thematically the results of the focus groups and individual interviews, including student comments drawn from the qualitative data. Subsequent sections of the report provide a detailed analysis of the 2011 exit survey and compare those outcomes to the 2007 initial survey. Finally, a discussion and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative analyses provides the basis for the conclusions and recommendations derived from the study.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, 2007 INITIAL SURVEY

The results of the initial survey indicated that first-year students come to Georgetown with moderate levels of religious belief and significant exposure to persons of other religious traditions. The students generally reported being liberal and open-minded on general questions of religious faith and demonstrated positive life aspirations toward action for social justice. Student responses demonstrated a high degree of tolerance of diverse religious views, including a willingness to see some truth in others’ beliefs, while their actual knowledge about religious traditions—both their own and others—was uneven.

### STUDENTS’ RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS

Of the 460 students responding to the initial survey, about half (56%) identified with one of the Christian traditions, while less than 10 percent came from the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or another faith. The remaining 35 percent of the students did not identify with any particular religious tradition. Student responses to questions about religious background revealed that:

- 89 percent claimed that they could relate well to people of different races, nations, and religions.
- 60 percent of the students reported regularly discussing religion with their friends; 74 percent regularly discussed politics with their friends.
- 49 percent of students indicated an intention to study religion beyond the 2-course general education requirement at Georgetown.
- The great majority of students thought they would have opportunities to learn about other religions through courses (95%), events and lectures (91%), and to discuss their own religion and spirituality with others (90%).

Student expectations of their opportunities to gain knowledge of other religions, to study its role in the world and in their own lives, and to develop personal spirituality during college confirmed they had the interest and intention to increase their knowledge and understanding of diverse religions and their adherents.

### ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION IN GENERAL

Despite the diversity of religious backgrounds of the respondents, there was consensus on several strongly shared opinions and values. The overwhelming majority of students:

- agreed that non-religious people can be moral (96% agreed);
- expressed a willingness to see some truth in others’ beliefs (79%);
- agreed that knowing people from diverse religions could help them become more tolerant (95%).

More interesting, perhaps, was the finding that students across the spectrum of faiths (or no faith) held similar views about several common religious claims. Students disagreed that:

- ‘Prayer can change the course of my life and events’ (45% disagreed);
- ‘Only religious belief can explain the deepest mysteries of life’ (59%);
- one’s own religion is superior to others (75%).

These open attitudes towards religion and the relative consensus among students on related values indicated that there was strong potential for further development of interreligious understanding during their undergraduate years at Georgetown.

### KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SPECIFIC RELIGIONS

In this initial survey, we wanted to assess the general level of knowledge of world religions the group as a whole possessed, especially regarding religions other than their own. Because misconceptions often arise from a lack of accurate information, we wanted to gauge the level of student knowledge of religions.
While over 78 percent of student respondents indicated that they had basic exposure to religious people beyond their tradition, their lack of knowledge of other religions was somewhat surprising. Student responses to ‘true/false’ statements about basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism indicated that student confidence in their knowledge of other religions was much higher than their religious literacy. This mismatch between understanding and confidence indicates that students thought they were more prepared than they actually were to engage knowledgeably with people from divergent religious backgrounds. Highlights of the findings from this section of the survey follow:

- The students as a group felt relatively secure in their knowledge of Christianity, but expressed less confidence of Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. Students overall claimed substantially less knowledge of Hinduism.
- While students expressed low confidence in their knowledge of Hinduism, they in fact recorded high numbers of correct responses for questions about the major texts (77%), the focus of Hindu moral life (85%), historical origins (75%), and claims about the eternity of the soul (89%).
- When asked about Hindu views toward women’s rights, human rights, peaceful dispute resolution, and tolerance, most students chose an equivocal response option.²
- In terms of tolerance, women’s rights, and peaceful dispute resolution, students rated Christianity much lower than Buddhism.
- 65 percent agreed that Buddhism is a tolerant religion and 76 percent believed Buddhists use peaceful means to resolve disputes.
- 74 percent thought Christians take a strong interest in human rights.
- 68 percent disagreed that ‘Muslims view women as deserving the same rights as men.’
- 53 percent agreed that ‘Judaism is a tolerant religion and Jews in general are tolerant.’

It is entirely possible that students may have known more about the basic tenets of these religions than they could confidently report. However, it was clear that lack of confidence in their knowledge made them hesitant to agree or disagree with subjective statements about these religious adherents.

In designing the survey, we knew that we would follow it with focus groups and interviews during the next three years. As we expected, we found that the student responses to the initial survey were revealing, but did not provide enough depth to allow us to make accurate statements about how students really felt about intercultural and interreligious issues. Consequently, the qualitative data we collected provides a much richer and vibrant portrait of these students and their relationships with people of other cultures and religions. The following section describes these supporting qualitative data sources in detail.

During the four years of the study, several sources of qualitative data were collected in order to illuminate and triangulate student responses on the initial and exit surveys. While the survey responses provide an accurate indication of student attitudes and beliefs, these multiple choice and scalar responses (strength of agreement) are best interpreted within the context of the range of varied student comments in focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and the three reflection questions on the exit survey.

**QUALITATIVE DATA SOURCES**

**SPRING 2008 THROUGH FALL 2010 FOCUS GROUPS**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of student attitudes towards their own and others’ religious faiths, we conducted seven focus groups over the four years of the study. Student participants in the Spring 2008 and Fall 2008 groups were drawn from the 291 students who indicated on the 2007 online survey that they could be contacted for other study components. In order to gain a wider perspective on student opinions and experiences, invitations to the Fall 2009 and Fall 2010 sessions were sent to all 460 students who participated in the 2007 survey.

The first focus group, held in February 2008 had eight student participants. The conversation centered on students’ experiences encountering diverse people around campus. Discussion topics included:

- how students meet new people (in class, dorms, at student events, off campus) and the diversity of the student body
- whether students seek out people similar to, or different from, themselves
- how often students discuss their views on religion and spirituality and interact with people of different faiths;
- whether students have attended worship services of their own or another faith

Two focus groups were held in the fall semester in December 2008. Ten students participated in the first focus group, discussing the impact of the campus religious environment on their student experience at Georgetown. Their conversation explored the following topics:

- how Georgetown has influenced students’ awareness of the religious beliefs of others, as well as a deeper understanding of their own
- how the campus religious environment influences student involvement with religious practices or religion in
general (availability of services, chaplains, etc.)
- the extent to which friends' religious views influence student participation in religious activities whether in their own, in other faiths, or in those moving away from faiths

The second focus group in December 2008 had nine additional students, whose discussion centered on the impact of the campus religious environment on student participation in community service. Discussion topics included:

- the effect of attending a religious university on student motivation or opportunity to participate in community service
- experiences during community service that challenged student values or beliefs
- whether students met people of other faiths through service opportunities, and how (if) that had changed their views of other religions

The fourth and fifth focus groups were held in the fall of 2009, and included 12 and 9 participants, respectively. Some of these students were drawn from the original group of the 460 respondents to the 2007 initial survey, while others were junior year students who did not participate in the survey ('non-responders'). The general themes for these two groups were 'tolerance' and 'Georgetown as a “safe space” for religion.' Specific discussion prompts included:

- how student experiences compare to original expectations regarding interreligious and intercultural diversity on campus
- about their own religion (or lack of one) and their views about other religions
- challenging experiences regarding culture or religion at Georgetown and how these experiences have changed or expanded student understanding of interreligious and intercultural diversity

The final two focus groups were held in the fall semester of 2010, each group comprising 12 senior year students, some from the 460 initial survey respondents and others who had not participated in the 2007 survey or any subsequent study components. The general theme for these two groups was 'Reflecting on your four years at Georgetown.' Specific discussion prompts included:

- how open or tolerant of religion, race/ethnicity and cultural diversity participants have found the Georgetown University campus community, and how welcoming or comfortable it has been for individual students
- if students have encountered challenging situations concerning religion or diversity on campus, how (or if) these experiences have expanded their understanding of interreligious and intercultural diversity
- if students' views toward religious doctrines, belief systems, and adherents within their own tradition or outside have altered in the past four years and how and why these changes have emerged/developed

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<th>Table 1 below summarizes the schedule of groups, discussion themes, and number of students participating in each session:</th>
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After the first year of the study (AY 2007-08), focus groups were held in the fall semester. Individual interviews took place during spring semester of the third and fourth years of the study. This allowed us to interview three distinct groups of students: those studying on the Georgetown campus, those who were studying abroad, and those who had returned from study abroad the previous fall semester. The following section describes these interviews in more detail.

**SPRING 2009 AND SPRING 2010 INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

In addition to soliciting student perspectives in focus groups, we also wanted to engage students who had been involved in both the initial survey and one or more of the follow-up focus groups. During the spring semesters of study years 2 and 3, we conducted in-depth individual interviews with 40 students, some of whom were studying abroad during their junior year. All 40 of the interviewed students had participated in the 2007 online survey and had indicated that they wanted to participate in additional focus groups or interviews.

**Spring 2009: Focus on Georgetown campus experiences**

The first group of interviewees comprised 19 students, all of whom were studying on the Georgetown campus during
Spring 2009 semester when the interviews took place. Interview questions and topics discussed with these students included:

- how/if the university’s heritage and identity has influenced the student’s relationship to religion in general and to their faith tradition in particular
- how comfortable the student feels discussing or expressing their point of view on a faith tradition outside of their own
- in what ways experiences with other students and practices of different faith traditions have changed the student’s perceptions or perspectives about either the faiths in general or those people in particular;

**Spring 2010: Focus on study abroad**

The second group of 21 students was interviewed during spring semester, 2010. These interviewees included seven students currently studying abroad during Spring 2010 semester; another seven students who had studied abroad during Fall 2009 and had returned to campus for Spring 2010; and an additional 7 students who had not studied abroad and therefore were studying on the Georgetown campus for the full 2009-2010 academic year. Specific question prompts for these three sets of interviews included:

For students who studied abroad:

- student reactions to similarities and differences in the overseas campus culture, environment, and curricular experiences (teaching style, student interaction) compared with Georgetown;
- if and how the student’s own faith practice was affected by their overseas sojourn, such as challenges to their beliefs or experiences that caused them to reevaluate or adapt their religious practices because of their overseas social context;

For students who did not study abroad:

- opportunities for intercultural and interreligious contact and learning the student has had during their years at Georgetown;
- how undergraduate education prepared them for intercultural and interreligious experiences, and whether or not they would feel comfortable traveling, studying, or living overseas in a different culture for a period of time;

In addition to the volume of oral data generated by the focus group discussions and individual student interviews, we collected written narratives and comments from students on the exit survey and in individual response papers. These qualitative data sources are described in the following section.

Table 2 below summarizes the schedule of interviews, conversation focus, and number of students participating in each cohort:

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<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>Experiences of students currently studying abroad</td>
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<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>Experiences of student returnees from Fall ’09 study abroad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>Experiences of students who did not study abroad (seniors)</td>
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**Table 2. Summary of individual interview dates, topics, and participants**

**SPRING 2011 QUALITATIVE WRITTEN DATA**

**Individual Student Reflection Papers**

During the four years of the study, several student participants exhibited a strong interest in the study topics and activities. In order to take advantage of their long-term participation in the study, we invited a small group of students to write reflection papers focusing on interreligious and intercultural diversity. These response papers were invited in December 2009 and were to be completed by March 2010 in order to be included in the study. Several papers reflected personally salient themes for the writers, including experiences as racial, sexual, or national minorities at Georgetown. The eight papers were written by a diverse group of students who had participated in the initial survey (2007), at least one focus group, and the individual interviews, and consequently were highly relevant to the study’s themes.

**SPRING 2011 STUDENT COMMENTS ON ONLINE EXIT SURVEY**

In addition to the reflection papers, the final three exit survey items provided a wealth of qualitative data in the form of short narrative comments. Over 200 students described how their undergraduate years at Georgetown affected their interreligious and intercultural understanding. These narrative comments were separately coded and thematically analyzed to provide an additional source of illumination focused on the quantitative survey responses.
QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

During the four academic years following administration of the initial survey, the study coordinated a series of focus groups and individual interviews that engaged students in conversations about their interreligious and intercultural views. Because the first focus group held in February 2008 included only 8 students, we delayed our analysis of the qualitative data until the second year of the study.

Based on the results of the fall 2007 survey and the spring 2008 focus group, however, we did identify the following general research questions for the remaining three years of the study:

- Can increased academic knowledge of other religions or cultures, in and of itself, increase interreligious or intercultural understanding?
- How does direct, personal experience with another faith or its adherents affect interreligious understanding, whether through friendships, attendance at services, or during discussions outside the classroom?
- What are the results of the combination of academic study and personal interactions with those of other faiths or cultures (friendships, campus activities, study abroad, etc.) in promoting interreligious or intercultural understanding?
- While we did not want to base the remaining focus groups and interviews too closely on the results of this one conversation, we did want to allow the student perspectives to emerge from the data and inform our subsequent inquiries.

TWO-YEAR SUMMARY OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

By the end of spring semester 2009, we had conducted three focus groups and 19 individual student interviews. This enabled our preliminary analysis to include the responses and voices of some 45 students, representing a 15 percent sample of those initial survey participants who had agreed to take part in subsequent study activities. Accordingly, we carried out a thematic analysis of the student comments made during the 2008 focus groups and Spring 2009 interviews. As we read through the student comments and responses, we began to see trends over the course of several semesters indicating a deepening understanding of and engagement with religious faith.

Overall, the evidence of student learning demonstrated by comments clustering around our provisional themes indicated the benefits of intellectual discussions of religion in class (e.g. theology courses such as “Problem of God”) but also interactions with friends of different faiths, or no faith, as well as a campus climate of openness to religion. The most significant recurring themes, followed by typical comments, include:

1. Classroom intellectual and theoretical knowledge had expanded students’ perceptions of religion:
   - “Taking the class [‘Problem of God’] both confirmed in me the fact that I don’t buy into religion and I am an atheist but on the other side of that it also increased my awareness of why other people might.” (SP 09)

2. Students with a religious affiliation, and those without one, were learning that religion is complex and should not be disregarded or discounted theologically, intellectually, or politically:
   - “In the 11th grade I would have told anyone who asked that I was just dogmatic, straight-out atheist, and that changed gradually but ‘Problem of God’ accelerated it, displayed that these are complex issues not black and white, that you can’t just go around and say that there’s no God.” (SP 09)

3. Interaction with friends led to an increase in understanding (emotional) and knowledge (intellectual) of others’ religious beliefs and practices:
   - “I think the interesting thing about the multitude of religions [on campus] is that it just makes you more comfortable with the idea of different religions. Just the fact that you meet people from that religion, that religion doesn’t seem alien to you. So, I think the best thing about Georgetown is the religious diversity because then other religions just become normal to you, at least for me. I am like, ‘cool, Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics…It just helps.” (FL 08)

4. Students were more open to attending religious services outside of their own faith (or if they did not have a faith tradition) than they were in high school:
   - “The diversity here allows someone like me who was never allowed to go to a Catholic mass to go to a Catholic Mass, to go to a Jewish Shabbat.” (SP 08)

5. Students had begun to discover pluralism of belief and/or practice within their own religious traditions through encountering the diverse Georgetown community:
   - “When you talk to someone that is Muslim and then you put up a thing that ‘that is Muslim,’ it’s really easy to come up with a picture without seeing that there are many different types of Muslims within that religion. There is so much complexity as well and then seeing that same complexity within your own religion.” (FL 08)

6. Many students felt there was something unique about the Catholic/Jesuit identity and campus climate at Georgetown that fostered interreligious understanding and facilitated dialogue:
   - “Of all the schools I had gone and visited, Georgetown was by far the most active at promoting interreligious dialogue.” (FL 08)
7. Some students also openly discussed their challenging experiences with other students, professors, or others on campus regarding religion:
   • “I think one thing about Georgetown that is off-putting is that if you go, like, even on the sacred spaces tour you can see that there are sacred spaces for Christian—like, different Christian groups—and for Islam there is a sacred space and there is a JSA house as well. But there really isn’t any space for any other religion, really.” (SP 08)

8. Lack of knowledge about religious doctrines and practices made some students hesitant to discuss religion in the classroom or to participate in services outside of their own faith:
   • “I am not shy about voicing my opinions but with religion I am just a little more careful because people feel so deeply and you don’t want to say something that could hurt someone because you don’t know what you are talking about.” (SP 09)

In this last group of comments, the reluctance to discuss religion might also be related to a student’s recognition that traditions are complex and diverse. Consequently it became more difficult for students to make a statement that appropriately referred to all the members of any one religious group (e.g., ‘all Catholics, Jews, Muslims believe…’), including their own religious traditions.

Based on our preliminary analysis of the two-year data, then, it appears that academic knowledge about religions usually lead to greater tolerance of other faiths; students who self-identified as atheists gained a measure of respect for religion, as non-believers. Students also reported valuing friendships with people from different religious or spiritual beliefs and enjoyed attending religious services outside their own tradition.

THIRD AND FOURTH YEAR QUALITATIVE THEMATIC PATTERNS

Building on what we learned from the first two years of focus groups and interviews and the outcomes of the initial survey in 2007, we condensed our list of recurring themes into a set of three broad thematic patterns. These patterns were then used to categorize and evaluate student comments during the third and fourth year focus groups, interviews, and senior reflection papers, and included:

1. Self-reported evidence of student openness towards their own faith or people of other religions, cultures, belief systems, and perspectives. Examples reveal the progression of student attitudes:
   • “In my class I met an atheist for the first time. It made me realize that although I have always believed in this, clearly there are other people that don’t and think that they don’t have to.” (SP 09)
   • “Prior to Georgetown I had only read about and briefly experienced religions aside from my own. The environment on campus has allowed me to take part in other religious practices and form bonds with people who practice other religions.” (SP 11)

2. Student experiences (with friends, in classrooms, dorms, or at religious services) on campus or overseas have facilitated a change in intercultural and interreligious understanding and attitude towards others:
   • “Friends being involved in religion is so huge and couldn’t be a more important part of it. In the dorms people always say, hey are you going to Mass tonight? I mean we go in groups because it is social and it is an experience in addition to the religious service and that dynamic makes it a lot easier and makes you more involved.” (FL 08)
   • “The interaction with people from other faiths and people who have doubts about religion has strengthened my own relationship with God. Also, it has prepared me for the world, where everyone will come from different backgrounds which come to bear heavily on their religious beliefs.” (SP 11)

3. Challenging interreligious or intercultural experiences with students, professors, or others either on campus or overseas. Examples include:
   • “There are certain aspects of Georgetown’s Catholic identity that get forced on everybody and those…there are very few of them and they are excessively negative and they relate to backwards traditional notions about women’s health. For example, the fact that Hoyas for Choice cannot receive funding, the fact that Wisey’s can’t sell condoms.” (SP 09)
   • “I have had people ask me if I work here or assume I work here just because I am black. I have also had almost every teacher my freshman year ask me if I was on an athletic scholarship. Maybe they were just trying to make conversation; however, you don’t ask a black student on an almost all-white campus if they are, like, here on an athletic scholarship. That is such a stereotype.” (SP 10)

Using this analytic framework over the remaining two years enabled us to continue tracing the development of student attitudes and interreligious understanding as reflected in the qualitative data. In addition, we based several of the subsequent focus group discussion prompts and interview questions on student comments. This helped draw upon student experiences and emotional and intellectual development. Further, it allowed participants to respond to questions framed in their own language rather than in the words and ideas of the researchers.

For example, a student comment that arose out of the 2009 interviews became the impetus for one of the topics of the fall 2010 focus group. When asked about Georgetown’s Catholic heritage and its influence on the student experience, one interviewee said that the Jesuit identity is ‘comforting for students who are Catholic.’ The fact that religion was valued and discussed openly in class and on campus prompted the student to remark, “Faith is safe here.” This comment was incorporated as a discussion prompt for the 2010 focus groups considering ‘tolerance, and Georgetown as a safe space for religion.’
The spring 2010 individual interviews also yielded some interesting patterns of student comments and perspectives. Many of the students in the third year interviews, some of whom had studied abroad, had already participated in focus groups and appeared more comfortable talking about their experiences. The students who participated in the study were extremely diverse. Some students were from the US and had not traveled overseas while other students had moved to the US specifically to attend Georgetown. Some students were from a Catholic background while others were experiencing a Catholic or Jesuit institution for the first time. Because of this wide range of study participants, the researchers found varied responses to several interview questions. For example, the interviewer found that many of the issues raised by students from non-Abrahamic faiths were also echoed by some international students or some American students who had studied abroad.

In general, these students questioned whether the climate at Georgetown was as ‘interreligious’ as the campus brochures might suggest. For example, a student who had returned from studying abroad the previous semester had a broader perspective on interreligious and intercultural issues when he returned to the US. He said, “In my experience, there is plenty of talk on this campus about diversity and religion and all that stuff. But sometimes, the practice falls short.” Some students expressed that their personal experiences led them to believe that the campus might not be as supportive of non-Abrahamic traditions. As evidence, several students cited the inequalities in resources for various religions (lack of sacred spaces, religious services, and chaplains for those faiths).^8 One student who is a member of a minority religious group noted: “We do have students of all faiths, you know, not just the three Abrahamic religions, but we have students of all different faiths and just because the university is Catholic doesn’t mean that it overrides everything about everybody else.”

Two-thirds of the interviewed students had studied abroad; several were hesitant to openly discuss or practice their religion while living outside the US due to a variety of geo-political reasons in their host countries. For example, a student who had studied in China explained: “I tried to not ask direct questions about religion while I was in China because I didn’t want to put them in uncomfortable situations like that. Because it’s an atheist country, they’re not taught about religion at school.” Other students were religious minorities abroad which was an eye-opening experience for them; several were asked to explain their faith or its beliefs, occasions which the students used as opportunities to deepen their own knowledge. A Hindu student explained that “During my study abroad program, I realized I was the only Hindu around. I had to answer questions about my beliefs which made me want to learn more about it. I realized I don’t know as much about it as I could.” A Jewish student found that others just assumed he was religious because he self-identified as a Jew: “I guess I am a secular Jew. I had to explain what Jews believe and that kind of thing so I had to learn about it myself. I wanted to be sure I wasn’t misinforming people and it gave me a chance to learn more as well.”

A few students encountered challenges to their beliefs or values while studying abroad. For example, one student noted: “I have loved every minute of being here [Turkey] but I do struggle with some cultural issues that I thought I understood a lot better before I came here. I think I have struggled with some cultural issues including personal liberty, freedom of expression more than I thought I would before I came.” This student said her experience in Turkey made her more conscious of the freedoms she took for granted in the US before going abroad to study.

As many of the interviewed students had already participated in at least one focus group and as a result were somewhat comfortable with the interviewer, their comments were particularly candid. For example, when asked about their challenging religious or cultural experiences on the Georgetown campus, students mentioned the culture of ‘silence and avoidance’ on campus:

- “I think the culture at Georgetown is based on avoidance. Whether it’s racism or sexism or homophobia, they do a lot of lip-service but they don’t do much more than that.”
- “I think there is a lot of silence around racism on this [Georgetown] campus. People talk to other people of their own race about racism on campus but they will never talk to a person of color about it. The campus is pretty divided racially.”

The honesty of these students in critiquing their social environment and seeking ways to make their campus better indicates that they are deeply engaged in their college experience. Students spoke with candor and strength about difficult issues including race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Their willingness to engage in these discussions suggests that the climate at Georgetown raises student awareness of areas needing attention and improvement on campus. Moreover, these comments serve as a vibrant example of the Georgetown University motto “Men and Women for Others,” which encourages the community to speak out against conditions they perceive as unjust. Students who critiqued the interreligious environment are examples of young adults living the motto of the school and addressing their concerns with honesty and respect.

By contrast, when students spoke about their challenging religious or cultural experiences overseas, they were more apt to describe Georgetown as much more open and honest than what they experienced in their host countries:

- “People here [abroad] are not as vocal about issues or politics. I think at Georgetown we have a culture where we discuss a lot more issues. The American culture in general is far more open than other cultures about addressing the difficult stuff.”
- “I find that teachers [abroad] are not as willing to engage the class in discussion and people are far less likely or eager to talk to each other in class about issues. After class there is no real environment that fosters community discussion about politics or anything.”
When compared with their campuses abroad many students agreed that Georgetown and Americans in general, seemed more open to discussions of social and political issues than students abroad. Based on these differing views of social discourse, it appears that studying abroad may offer students a new perspective and critique their own environment if a school encourages robust dialogue. In most cases, students did not experience the same level of community engagement overseas.

Students also spoke frankly about their experiences of racism and self-segregation on campus, comparing Georgetown with the international campuses where they had studied abroad:

“There are so many cliques [at Georgetown]. The Mexican kids have their own group. The South Asians have their own group. You have to know someone to be invited in the group and if you do something wrong, you will quickly get kicked out of the group. There is not really much integration between groups. It is pretty divided.” (SP 10)

“In my experience, I found my campus in England to be very accepting of other people but I did notice that the American students who were there stuck together. I am guilty of it too, I guess. Sometimes, it just felt comfortable to hang out with other Americans. I guess it made me more sensitive to why the international students on the Georgetown campus always hang out with each other. Maybe they are homesick or lonely.”

While students were critical of occasions of racism and overall campus atmosphere at Georgetown, they were also aware that sometimes their own behavior contributed to ‘self-segregation’ at home and abroad. Students who had studied abroad were sensitized to racial and ethnic separation on campus. For example, the student who studied in England noticed that the Americans on that campus were guilty of ‘self-segregation,’ similar to international students on the Georgetown campus in Washington, DC. This realization enabled him to view ‘self-segregation’ from a new perspective and note that perhaps this behavior arose from loneliness or shyness instead of racial preferences. The openness of the students in individual interviews served as a corrective to the more tempered comments they may have made previously among a group of unfamiliar students whose beliefs and attitudes they did not know. For the remaining two years of the study, we continued to track attitudinal changes, as well as student interaction with people of different faiths.

THIRD AND FOURTH YEAR FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Two focus groups of junior-year students (comprising 21 participants) met in the fall semester of 2009 to discuss the topics of ‘Tolerance, and Georgetown as a “safe space” for religion,’ Two more groups, comprising senior-year students, met in Fall 2010 to discuss the topic ‘Reflecting on your four years at Georgetown.’ The composition of these groups included some students drawn from the original 460 respondents to the 2007 survey and others who entered Georgetown in 2007 but had not participated in the first-year survey. In this way, we aimed to have a broader representation of student voices and experiences in the last two years of the focus groups compared to the beginning of the study.

Applying our three broad thematic patterns to the Fall 2009 and Fall 2010 focus groups yielded additional evidence of attitudinal changes in students as they reflected on their years at Georgetown. Each of the broad themes is repeated below, followed by several representative comments drawn from the 2009 and 2010 focus groups.

1. Self-reported evidence of student openness towards their own faith or people of other religions, cultures, belief systems, and perspectives.
   - “Personally, I'm Jewish. I don't really practice; I'm not necessarily a believer. I think you can feel you're at a Catholic school, and that has made me more aware of other people's beliefs and I am more respectful.” (FL 09)
   - “I never thought I would be the type of person to hang around with people from different cultures and countries because I am generally shy. But, because of the classes I have taken and the discussions I have had, I am much more likely to seek out diverse people in my circle of friends.” (FL 10)

These comments reveal that as students gain confidence in their knowledge about different cultures or religions, they are more likely to speak to international students and engage them in discussion or to attend an interreligious event.

2. Student experiences (with friends, in classrooms, dorms, or at religious services) on campus or overseas that have facilitated a change in intercultural and interreligious understanding and affected the student’s attitude towards others.
   - “I went to the Middle East and made some really good friends. I realized that so much of what we learn is stereotypes. Seeing the things people have to deal with on an everyday basis that I don't have to deal with because of where I was born and my family. It really changed the way I view the politics now.” (FL 09)
   - “I had an eye opening experience in my Hinduism class. I couldn't believe that so many millions of people in the world follow this particular religious belief and I didn't know anything about it. Now, I go to puja services and I really enjoy the Hindu concept of religion and God.” (FL 10)

These comments reveal that interacting with people who hold different views from their own, can challenge previously held stereotypes. For students who studied abroad, they had the added benefit of reexamining their beliefs about their own culture and country. For students who did not study abroad, campus experiences provided opportunities for introspection and a generally positive change in attitude towards other religions and people of faith.
3. Challenging interreligious and intercultural experiences with members of the community either on campus or overseas.
   - “I had a ‘culture shock’ when I first came here because I am from a…well, basically, a poor black family from Baltimore. There is a ‘white culture’ and I didn’t know anything about it. There were not a lot of white kids in my neighborhood or in my high school. It was weird being here at first. People were judgmental about me.” (FL 10)
   - “In China, too, there was a lot of internal prejudice that went on there. Urban or Northern Han Chinese from the northern end mostly spent time indoors, so they are white while others with dark skin work outside and have a different social standing. It was strange to see some of the same things that happen here in a very different context there.” (FL 10)

These comments, demonstrate a deepening awareness and more mature reflection about encounters with challenging intercultural issues, including segregation, bias and prejudice, and racism. When students were in a familiar or comfortable environment, they were less likely to notice racial or ethnic problems. However, if students were a racial, ethnic, religious, or national minority on their home campus, or when they become one in an overseas context, they were more likely to pay attention to these issues.

SECONDARY THEMES FROM THIRD & FOURTH-YEAR FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

As discussed above, then, our qualitative analysis of the third and fourth-year data using the three broad recurring themes arising from the first two years of the study yielded rich evidence of student changes in intercultural understanding, religious tolerance, and personal growth. However, during the analysis, it became clear that there were a number of student comments that fit only tangentially into any one of the three thematic categories. Those comments that remained after we had applied our initial analytic framework were coded separately; our revised framework developed from the third and fourth-year data thus included several additional themes which had not been explicitly stated in the broad thematic patterns.

Three new categories emerged out of the focus group discussions and individual interview conversations as important minor themes. These new themes were:

- Parental discouragement of student exploration of other faiths
- Interaction between atheists and students of faith
- Critical incidents abroad that expanded students’ perspectives

We also searched the first and second-year qualitative data to see if any of these themes had arisen earlier. The only one of the new themes that students had commented on in prior years was the interaction between atheists and students of faith. Several comments from the first-year focus group and second-year interviews are included in the analysis below.

Some students reported significant opposition from their parents in regard to exploration of other faiths, including attending other services while they were in high school. Several cited the freedom and opportunities Georgetown offered them to participate in a variety of religious services and holy day observances:

“I am pretty careful not to tell my parents when I go home that I have visited mosques and temples and other places like that. I enjoy all of it but they are pretty conservative so it is not a conversation I will be having with them.” (FL 10)

Others talked about how being away from home had allowed them to be more independent in their attitudes and behaviors concerning their own faith:

“I did not come here as a particularly open person because my family is pretty conservative and religious. But I have had a lot of experiences that have made me change my mind. Just because that type of religious sentiment works for my parents does not mean that it has to work for me. I am free to make my own religious connections. I find that liberating.” (FL 10)

A few students mentioned their family’s prejudice against a specific religion:

“My good friend is Jewish and I am Catholic. My parents would freak out if I wanted to try a Jewish service when I lived at home. But here, I am on my own and I go with my friend because first, I was curious and now I kind of like it.” (SP 10)

These efforts to learn about other religions and be more open are an encouraging sign that the campus atmosphere has enabled students to increase their interreligious understanding despite their upbringing. One particularly striking comment was made by a Hindu student during her spring 2010 interview:

“I am learning about Islam as a Hindu which is interesting because at home I couldn’t learn about Islam because of my parents. But I like experimenting with other religious traditions and rituals. So I wore a hijab for two days to see what it feels like. It was so weird. People look at you funny and it opened my eyes to how hard it must be for some Muslim women and also how committed they must be to their faith.” (SP 10)

This student’s courage and willingness to ‘walk in another’s shoes’ enabled her to participate in this social experiment and change her opinions about a religion that was viewed unfavorably by her family. This created a further shift in her interreligious understanding and led her to become more active in interreligious dialogue and religious events on campus.

The second new theme that arose from our reanalysis of the focus group and interview data was the interaction between athe-
ists and students of faith. Several students talked about how their views changed as a result of class discussions or meeting atheist students on campus:

“In my ‘Problem of God’ class, I had a boy who was an atheist that got into intense discussions every single class with our Jesuit priest and our Jesuit priest LOVED it. He thought it was the best thing ever and I think that's really cool.” (SP 08)

“I didn’t really understand atheism before I came here. I didn’t have a context for it. Now I have some really close atheist and humanist friends. It doesn’t appeal to me. It’s not for me. But, I get it.” (FL 10)

These comments are especially significant in developing interreligious understanding, which often only refers to people from differing faith traditions. The fact that students could gain a deeper understanding of a person’s choice to decline any religious faith is particularly noteworthy when this new outlook is gained at a religious institution. This accepting attitude towards atheism further indicates that the campus religious environment is conducive to true spiritual exploration where people of no faith are also included in interreligious dialogue.

Similarly, several students who were atheists reported a more positive perspective on religion and people of faith since coming to Georgetown:

“I am not religious in any way and in high school I read a lot of things like Richard Dawkins and definitely bought into their ideology and I think taking the class [Problem of God] definitely opened my eyes that philosophically there is another side of the coin here. Not necessarily rational justification for them [religions] but they have a role either emotionally or spiritually in people’s lives and though I don’t think so myself, taking that class definitely enhanced my understanding of why other people are attracted to religion.” (SP 09)

Finally, a number of students related critical incidents during their study abroad, the third and final new theme derived from our reanalysis. Some of these experiences expanded student perspectives on religious freedom, race relations, and the power of language. In addition, during the spring 2010 interviews, students spoke of facing for the first time what it was like to be different, a minority, or ‘the other.’ Coming from the familiar Georgetown campus, these students tasted the anxiety, alienation, and loneliness that can accompany a sojourn in a different culture, where all of one’s everyday habits and customary social cues are suddenly replaced by unfamiliar ones:

“I was in Turkey and was just really shocked with the whole headscarf issue. It was just really weird to see women have to remove their scarf whenever they went into government buildings. And men couldn’t wear beards. It was so strange for me to see these issues with public religion when everything in America is so different. And we [Americans] think we don’t have any religious freedom.” (SP 10)

“I am completely sensitized to race relations in a way that I never could have been if I had just lived in this country my entire life. You listen to the media. You buy the rhetoric. If you are not black, you never really know what it’s like to be black in America. When I went to South Africa, everything changed. I saw racism from a new angle. It floored me.” (SP 10)

These experiences clearly reveal a shift in perspective, as students compared unfamiliar social values with the American context which they had unconsciously assumed as usual and ‘normal’ up until their sojourn in another country and culture. The juxtaposition of American norms with those of another cultural context caused these students to question their assumptions and to see their own culture and society from a comparative perspective.

The final category of comments in the new themes derived from focus groups and interviews comprised students’ curricular and campus life suggestions for the university and faculty members. These comments are discussed later in this report in conjunction with the researchers’ conclusions and implications for practice.

SENIOR REFLECTION PAPERS: SELECTED COMMENTS

The eight students who wrote senior year reflection papers were a diverse group. They included a young Latina woman from a working-class family in south Texas; a self-identified gay student; an upper-middle class white Episcopalian student; a young black woman from a low-income family in Baltimore; an American student of Bangladeshi descent; a student raised Roman Catholic who self-identified as ‘agnostic’; a student raised in a devout Catholic family who grew in her faith while at Georgetown; and a Buddhist student from Taipei, Taiwan with an Italian-American mother.

We originally intended the focus of these papers to be student responses to interreligious understanding and how participation in study activities related to their undergraduate experience. Most of the students did address these issues; in addition, however, all the essays have an underlying theme of growing more comfortable with their identities (gay, straight, black, Asian, poor, mixed-race, etc.). This is a poignant measure of student attitudinal changes towards interreligious and intercultural issues. Students wrote about issues that explored identity formation, spiritual development, personal understanding, intercultural friendships, and self-acceptance. It became clear from the essays that as these students became more comfortable with their own ideas, thoughts, and beliefs, they also grew more open and tolerant of others.

The following discussion includes comments from the student reflections organized under the overarching theme of identity de-
velopment within the context of intercultural and interreligious experiences. Excerpts are arranged under several minor themes, allowing the comments of any one student to be included under more than one topic, thereby helping to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. These minor themes are:

- personal religious experiences
- cross-cultural encounters
- prejudice and bias incidents
- experiences of socioeconomic inequity
- environmental effects on the salience of identity variables

These themes do not have firm boundaries; in fact, there is a fair amount of overlap between them. For example, experiencing bias or prejudice might have led a student to expand or re-evaluate his or her personal religious perspectives. Similarly, a cross-cultural encounter on campus may have led a student to think more deeply about identity formation and the distinguishing features of personal religious beliefs.

**Personal religious experiences**

Several of the reflections included short narratives of how being raised in a religious environment influenced a student’s experience at Georgetown. A Catholic student, who later chose to study theology along with psychology, recalls how the intellectual skepticism of her first theology class jolted her out of the complacency of her traditional religious education:

“Day one of my freshman year at Georgetown University I entered my theology class eager, overenthusiastic, and at least 15 minutes early. I was reared in a devoutly Catholic home where missing Sunday Mass was not an option and attending CCD class was as routine as brushing my teeth; thus, I came in confident that I would be able to quickly understand and succeed in my theology courses. About five minutes into the class, I realized my erroneous line of thinking. I was stupefied by the professor’s research, which questioned the historical credibility of certain biblical stories. For 18 years of my life I had been taught to abide by this strict moral, biblical code. Thus began my undergraduate career at Georgetown University and the start of a four-year long journey of self-discovery and transformation.”

This student found that the Jesuit approach to education and the academic study of theology and religion helped her to explore her identity as a Catholic, as she was “forced to challenge my beliefs and confront difficult, often unanswerable questions about morality, truth, and identity.” Other students expressed similar views in focus groups and individual interviews.

One student revealed that although she was raised in a Catholic family and attended Mass and religious education classes regularly, she was having doubts about her faith in high school. Even before arriving on campus as a freshman, she felt apprehensive about her lack of faith and worried that she would be excluded.

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In his paper, this student reflects on how his perspective changed during his years at Georgetown. Although he joined the Muslim Students Association, at first he struggled with his Muslim identity, questioning the strength of his faith commitment:

“In college, many began to see me as a Muslim first by virtue of my nominal attachment to the organization [Muslim Students Association]. I asked myself whether I was a good Muslim as I saw other Muslims who seemed to embrace religious rituals such as prayer more fervently than I ever had. Moreover, I had discovered young Muslims aspiring to be religious leaders and eager to deliver sermons and prayers. I questioned

Contrary to her expectations, this student found Georgetown encouraged students of diverse faiths to live and study alongside students of no faith, or those who questioned the idea of religion. She found herself relaxing about her religious views because “it was such a relief to have an adult sharing my sentiments.” This sense of acceptance enabled her to explore spiritual fulfillment without organized religion and come to terms with her sense of loss in abandoning belief in life after death, which she confided “is something I have missed since renouncing Catholicism.”

In contrast, another study participant had a very different religious experience at Georgetown as an American Muslim student. Born in the United States to South Asian parents, he described his religious up-bringing in America:

“My experience as a Muslim had been informed culturally during my childhood. I associated Islam more with Bengali culture, without truly embracing the power of faith and spirituality, nor appreciated the diversity of cultures embedded within Islamic tradition. During my teenage years, I saw Islam as a personal commitment. I extricated the faith from my public life. While non-Muslim friends understood that I harbored conservative values informed by my religious beliefs, they viewed me as an individual first.”

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“P

by students who were practicing Catholics:

“When I filled out my application [to Georgetown], my mother insisted I check the ‘Catholic’ box under the religious affiliation section, rather than my preference of ‘agnostic’ or ‘no religion.’ She worried that my faithless nature would diminish the rest of my academic, service and extracurricular accomplishment, and I arrived at Georgetown convinced that I was damaged goods because I did not subscribe to any organized religion. That could never have been farther from the truth. No one looked down on me because I turned away from Catholicism, and nobody shunned me because I did not follow an organized religion. Freedom from religion, rather than the freedom to practice a religion, has characterized my personal experiences with religion at Georgetown.”
whether I was a true Muslim for not displaying as strong conviction at face value.”

Over time, he became more comfortable with his religious and cultural identity and “came to understand that my Muslim and South Asian identity conterminously exists with my American identity.” Writing his reflection paper as a senior, he described his faith “as a strong element of my personal identity” and concluded: “Whereas I questioned my religious sincerity my sophomore and junior years of college because I viewed myself less submissive to faith than others, I no longer question myself. I can comfortably represent my faith, without questioning the authenticity of my presence in religious circles.”

These student experiences, then, illustrate the divergent paths supported by the open religious climate at Georgetown: a student who questions and ultimately rejects religion may value the sense of acceptance extended to non-believers struggling with spiritual and religious questions. Alternatively, a student with no particular doubts about his faith may find a deeper understanding of his identity based on his experiences as an ethnic and religious minority on campus.

Cross-cultural encounters

In their reflection papers, students shared their experiences of meeting people of other cultures, both on the Georgetown campus and as a result of studying abroad. Even for those who remained at Georgetown throughout their undergraduate years, had many opportunities to meet diverse students and learn about their cultures. The following excerpts focus mainly on these home campus experiences.

An American student who described herself as a freshman "who fit the Georgetown stereotype of well-off, white, private school kids" reflected on her intercultural learning gained from living with two Asian apartment mates. By the end of the year, she was glad that they had shared an apartment for a year. Her reflection describes how the experience helped her learn about both Asian and American cultures:

“For our sophomore year my roommate and I ended up in an apartment with a girl from Korea who had been raised in England and a Taiwanese girl from Japan. While we were paired with these girls by happenstance, I was surprised by how much I learned not only about their cultures, but also my own. That year I was privy to events I would not otherwise have been invited to simply because I was living with two Asian girls. They began inviting us to the Asian Society events and though we did not understand a word of the Korean spoken at my roommate’s weekly dinners with her friends, she always invited us to eat with them.”

The growing friendship between the American and Asian roommates allowed them to share and discuss details of their daily lives. In her reflection, the American student described how her Korean roommate studied in the library until 4:00 a.m. every day, while she herself (and her American roommate) almost always went to bed by midnight. After the Korean student asked the Americans how they got all their work done and still slept so much, the American confessed in her reflection paper that “while my roommate and I had privately wondered how she managed on so little sleep, it was interesting to consider the fact that she found our habits equally bizarre.” At the end of the year, the two Asians told the Americans that they were “their only white friends.”

This comment, as well as their year of living together, impressed upon the American student “how different our experiences had been at the same school,” and led her to express that she “was equally grateful that we had the opportunity to share them.”

While American students generally think of intercultural experiences from their own point of view, one of the reflection paper writers was an international student whose cross-cultural encounter was with the typically American students of Georgetown. A Buddhist student from Taiwan, he arrived at Georgetown well aware of the differences in his cultural, social, and economic background as compared to the majority of students on campus. Hoping to meet some ‘atypical’ students at Georgetown, he tells of joining the Alternative Spring Break program, an opportunity for students to volunteer their labor and assistance in a week-long social justice service endeavor:

“There was one intercultural experience which marked the early turning point of my social fortunes at Georgetown, as it introduced me to students of all backgrounds who were actually interested in something more than getting wasted at Thirds every weekend, or that one legendary Spring Break. The simple rewards of serving those less privileged in our society, I thought, may provide some respite for my pathetic existence as a normal human being at Georgetown. I fully expected to show up to the ASB information session on that gloomy, rainy November night and see a bunch of poor, wet souls as myself—the flotsam and jetsam of Georgetown’s social network—stumbling aimlessly towards bleak sign-up sheets like the homeless at a soup kitchen. Instead, I found a warm room in White-Gravenor packed with about 50 bright-eyed, enthusiastic, and energetic Georgetown students eager to make a real and potentially lasting difference in the lives of total strangers. I wasn’t so different after all, and in fact pretty much had to compete with a large number of students for limited spots in ASB’s 9 programs.”

As this student found, “something was clearly different about the priorities of this particular group of decidedly American Georgetown students who were interested in spending precious college time and even a little money in helping complete strangers rebuild their lives.” Their attitude towards volunteer public service were radically different from what the student had experienced
in Taiwan, where “the concept of organized community service beyond the parameters of the neighborhood, religious, or professional community is actually quite alien [to Taiwanese society].” His reflection also describes his deepening understanding and appreciation of these students as they all worked together for a week in a small impoverished former mining town in far southwestern Virginia. As this student discovered, despite their cultural and economic differences, there were many students at Georgetown who held values similar to his own.

Students who studied abroad, not surprisingly, wrote about transformative intercultural experiences in other countries. A minority American student studying in Madrid found herself crossing cultural borders that she had rarely approached while living on campus among her Latino friends. She began her reflection paper by describing her arrival at Georgetown in cross-cultural terms: “Freshman year, coming from a predominantly Latino community, I was unprepared for the culture shock I was going to experience on the Hilltop.” While she soon found a sympathetic community of Latino students on campus, it was her study-abroad experience that helped move her out of her comfort zone:

“Georgetown also helped me grow and develop while socializing with people of other backgrounds through my study abroad experience. Although the Georgetown Office of International Programs highlights the novelty of meeting locals during your study abroad experience, I valued it for different reasons. Instead I found myself forging life-long friendships with fellow Hoyas. Leaving the close-knit, progressive community largely composed of students of color whom I had grown so fond of during my years at Georgetown was a culture shock in and of itself, but at the end of my time in Spain, I was more than happy I had done so. I returned to Georgetown senior year with a whole new perspective on the supposed ‘Jane and Jack Hoyas.’”

This student’s experience illuminates the value of study abroad for minority American students whose experience on their home campus often parallels international students. “Being in a completely foreign country where our everyday routines from classes to meals were drastically altered, I was forced out of my comfort zone only to be pleasantly surprised.” Rather than “being judged and looked down on” because of her working-class Latino roots, she found herself becoming friends with students from white upper-middle class backgrounds and in the process enlarging her view of the typical Georgetown student.

Bias incidents

Students were quite candid in sharing experiences of bias and prejudice at Georgetown. Several students commented on clothing norms at Georgetown, apparently finding it remarkable how similarly many students dressed and looked. One student observed that dress was one example of a tendency towards conformity on campus which emphasized and excluded those who differed:

“One thing I have come to notice more and more over the years is that Georgetown is an incredibly normative place. People here look alike, dress alike, act alike. From North Face jackets, to Uggs boots, to Sperry’s, to anything sold by Vineyard Vines, the clothing styles here are, to say the least, limited. This even extends to the places people eat—Sweetgreen with a Georgetown Cupcake for dessert; the places people live—Burleith, West Georgetown; to the places people play—the Tombs, Thirds, Rugby. This wouldn’t be a problem if these were merely benign, even cute, campus traditions, but people who don’t fall into the mainstream are judged and stigmatized.”

While some readers might find the tone of this student’s comments to be somewhat cynical or sarcastic, he has identified a legitimate source of bias on campus: prejudice on the part of some students based on the outward appearance and behavioral choices. This is a recurring theme that first emerged within the focus groups and the individual interviews but found its strongest expression in student essays. Many students noted that being ‘different’ is only acceptable within limits and that the norms of campus culture often led to exclusion and segregation on campus. Socioeconomic diversity plays a prominent role in the manifestation of difference; for example, students from lower-income families might in fact prefer the same restaurants, clothes, and shoes as wealthier Georgetown students but simply cannot afford these expensive indulgences. As this student’s essay suggests, differences on campus were not always embraced and did, on occasion, create discord and misunderstanding.

Prejudice based on appearance was not the only type of bias students wrote about in reflection papers. A gay student criticized campus culture for its tendency to homogenize rather than diversify:

“We missed a great opportunity three years ago [2008] to make Georgetown a genuinely better place, and not just expand the reach of the dominant campus culture. Instead of making Georgetown gayer, the Out for Change Campaign just made the gays more Georgetown-y. Only when we value people not because they look the same as us, but because they are deep, kind, artistic, or interesting, will we live in an actually diverse and improved campus. We must change our mindset of how diversity, and really student life in general, works. It is crucial to point out that these problems are not structural—i.e., they cannot be addressed by the staff and administration, or by fiddling with the design of the institution, or by forming some committee or commissioning some report. They are student problems, caused by students, and will only improve if we find ways to change the campus student culture itself.”

Clearly this student is challenging Georgetown students to cultivate inwardly and demonstrate outwardly those habits of
heart and mind that accept and value diversity rather than expecting assimilation. His reflection concludes: “Until then, we have done the gay community no favors. Ironically, now that we gays are more ‘accepted,’ there is an added expectation that we will conform to all other aspects of Georgetown culture. We left the closet just to get in line at Georgetown Cupcake.”

Experiences of socioeconomic inequity

While there is a stereotype of Georgetown students ‘Jane and Joe Hoya,’ described as “well-off, white, private school kids,” at least half the students writing senior reflection papers did not fit that description. These students did not all relate experiences of bias or prejudice directed towards them, but some of them did reveal their anxiety and discomfort when confronted by the disparity between their own economic means and those of the majority of their classmates.

An especially poignant example, related by a young woman from Texas, is the story of her arrival as an entering freshman at Georgetown:

“In came to Georgetown, thousands of miles away from my home, on a Greyhound bus. My father and I traveled for what seemed like an endless time all the way from Deep South Texas. Coming from a working class, Latino family, the first aspect that caught my eye at Georgetown was the wealth dispersed throughout the predominantly white student population. The day I stepped foot on campus, I found myself at a loss hearing of exotic, vacation spots in unfamiliar countries and amazed by the synchronized fashion of the many blond haired girls that walked around campus. My white roommate’s family, that consisted of her parents, grandmother and sister, could afford accommodations in Washington D.C. for the whole week of New Student Orientation. They all helped her move in, while I only had my father drop me off and help me haul in my luggage before he departed on a Greyhound bus back home [to Texas].”

This student described her initial campus experience as ‘culture shock’ and admitted she “felt like a foreigner in the country where I was born and raised.” She was embarrassed by her lack of wealth and modest appearance: “I felt like an outsider in a sea of North Face jackets and Ugg boots, and had a hard time adjusting to life at Georgetown.” Ultimately she became involved in a variety of campus student organizations and became more comfortable with her working-class Latino identity, but she remained aware of her differing socioeconomic status throughout her years at Georgetown.

A black student from a low-income family gave a similar account of her initial interactions with more affluent classmates, noting that the same incident was repeated at the start of each new class every semester:

“In almost all of my classes and for the past three years, every first day of class started out with a simple introduction of everybody. In addition, all I can remember about my fellow peers is what numerous countries they had been to over the summer or what fabulous vacations they had gone on or that their parents just bought a new summer home. All I could say was nothing, or that I worked. It became really clear to me really fast, how less fortunate I was than my peers, but it also became clear to me how grateful I am of the opportunity awarded to me.”

While painfully aware of her socioeconomic status in relation to her classmates, this student was nonetheless appreciative of the fact that she had successfully negotiated four years at Georgetown and was about to graduate: “The journey has been fast and hard, and even though I feel the path down this journey was not a happy one, I am grateful to experience an education I probably would not have received somewhere else.”

Environmental effects on the salience of identity variables

The final minor theme students addressed in their reflections was the complex interaction of the multiple components of their identities and how those elements changed in relative importance depending upon the context. For example, an international student from East Asia relates how even having an American mother and having spent his childhood life in the United States were not enough to make him feel a part of the majority student culture at Georgetown:

“As a fourth-year Buddhist student from Taipei, Taiwan, you could say that I’ve had my fair share of intercultural and interreligious experiences at Georgetown. Most of the early ones unfortunately involved me feeling quite different from the majority of students at Georgetown during my freshman year, by virtue of me not being Catholic, and/or not having grown up in the DC, New York, or Boston metropolitan areas. Yes, my Italian-American mother is the product of American suburbia through and through, and I actually did spend a few years living in Cambridge, MA and Chapel Hill, North Carolina during my childhood years. And despite having attended an ostensibly American-style high school at the Taipei American School, the America I witnessed on the Hilltop from 2007-2010 bore little resemblance to the America I remembered back in the early 1990s and 2000s.”

The very things that made him seem ‘American’ in Taiwan failed to compensate for unfamiliarity with the things that made him seem ‘foreign’ to the majority of Georgetown students: “Taiwan’s rather isolationist society insulated me to the full effects that Britney Spears, the boy bands, and the ‘90s cartoons’ everyone raves about in college would have otherwise had on my developing psyche.” Consequently, this student found he lacked the shared social and cultural experiences many other Georgetown students took for granted and admitted that consequently he found it hard
to sustain “the ‘Hi-What School-Where are you from’ conversa-
tion which became the staple of freshman year interaction.” With
his bicultural and mixed heritage background, it was easy for this
student to feel marginalized among “the decidedly American
Georgetown students” he met on the Hilltop.

Similarly, a South Asian American student used his reflection
paper to “speak of my personal evolution, through a myriad of
experiences and challenges I faced at Georgetown.” He described
a casual conversation with an Indian Sikh friend from his home-
town, also a Georgetown student, who joked about the effect of
environment on their identities:

“Two years ago, my friend and I were driving around
our hometown, reflecting on our experiences in college.
He remarked, ‘I feel as though we have an identity cri-
sis being from here. When we’re home, it’s like we’re
whiter than we really are. When we’re at Georgetown,
it’s as though we’re blacker.’ This was a joke, yet there
was more than a grain of truth to the statement. In con-
sequence, Georgetown has challenged me to question
diversity and see diversity in myself. It has forced me
to identify who I am, and order my multiple identities.
Am I an American? A Muslim? A South Asian? As my
friend bluntly phrased it, our personalities change tints
and shades depending on the environment we inhabit.
So do our identities.”

Reflecting on his journey of self-understanding at Georgetown,
this student recalls that “my high school English teacher told us in
class, two days before high school graduation, that college would
‘chop up, re-arrange, and re-assemble’ all the beliefs we had before
entering. She was right.” Like the Taiwanese student at George-
town and the Latino student in Spain, this student found that
‘identity’ is not unitary, but multifaceted, and was not construct-
ed not solely by himself, but jointly through interactions with
others by the social and physical situation they shared.

Taken together, these reflection papers explored the spectrum
of experiences students encountered at Georgetown relative
to religion, culture, class, and race, and how these elements
formed—and transformed—their identities during college.
Even while some of the students narrated negative incidents
on campus, most of them still seemed to feel that the path to
self-understanding, though often difficult, was worth travel-
ing. In the next section, we move from this close-up examina-
tion of the experiences of eight students to a panoramic view
of the comments of the 256 senior students responding to the
2011 exit survey.

EXIT SURVEY REFLECTION
COMMENTS

Our final source of qualitative data comprised 571 short
narrative student comments written in response to the three
reflection questions at the end of the online exit survey. As such,
the three reflection questions invited students to describe and
comment briefly on specific aspects of their interreligious expe-
riences at Georgetown. The questions, followed by the number
of student comments written in response to each, were:

• ‘Has Georgetown University increased your level of interre-
ligious understanding?’ (169)
• ‘As you approach graduation, please reflect on whether the
Catholic and Jesuit heritage of the school was an important ele-
ment of your experience.’ (223)
• ‘Has Georgetown University increased your level of inter-
cultural understanding?’ (179)

The 256 students responding to the exit survey wrote com-
ments in response to one or more of these questions, providing
a rich perspective on the major study questions from over half
of those who had also participated in the initial survey four
years earlier. As these reflections were drawn from a much larg-
er student population than had participated in the focus groups
and interviews, we coded and analyzed the survey comments
separately from the earlier qualitative data to avoid imposing a
narrower set of categories upon these remarks.

Based on this tailored thematic analysis of the survey com-
ments, the following set of themes resulted. The major themes
appearing in 10 percent to 30 percent of the 571 total com-
ments were:

• Classes/”Problem of God”/theology course requirement
(31%)
• Personal interactions with diverse people on campus
(20%)
• General campus atmosphere (e.g. diversity, openness,
challenges) (13%)

Minor themes that arose in fewer than 10 percent of the com-
ments included:

• Social justice/service/men and women for others’ (7%)
• Jesuit education/openness, intellectual curiosity (6%)
• Cura personalis/educating the whole person (5%)
• Study abroad experiences (4%)
• Opportunities to explore own/others’ faiths (4%)
• Sense of community/others with same values (3.5%)
• Catholic masses/Jesuits’ homilies (3%)
• Self-segregating campus (2%)

The following analysis summarizes the important major and
minor themes that arose from student responses to each ques-
tion, illustrates each theme with representative student com-
ments, and interprets the results as they relate to the study’s
major questions.

Summary of responses to Q23,
interreligious understanding

All of the major themes, plus one minor theme, emerged from
students’ responses to whether or not their years at Georgetown
had increased their interreligious understanding. Themes are listed below, followed by the number of comments related to each.

- “Problem of God”/theology course requirement (88 responses)
- Personal interactions with diverse people on campus (46)
- General campus atmosphere (diversity, Jesuit values) (26)
- Study abroad experience/s (9)

Georgetown University students are required to take two theology courses as part of their general education credits. While many students admitted they were not excited about this requirement prior to entering the school, most of their comments were positive. Typical excerpts included:

- “…the first opportunity for me to take serious, thoughtful courses in religion.”
- “…I have grown to greater understand the perspectives of deeply religious persons, and respect their right to hold these beliefs.”

Students mentioned that they appreciated courses on Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Chinese philosophy, which are more specialized classes offered by the Theology Department, as well as the introductory level “Problem of God” and “Jesuit Education” courses. In general, students praised their experience of Theology courses and noted that they had learned a lot about the importance of religion in society, politics, and culture.

Students were almost uniformly positive concerning the benefits of interacting with the diverse student population at Georgetown.

“Being here has exposed me to far more cultures and religious beliefs than I would have encountered otherwise.”

Personal interactions and conversations about religion with friends and roommates, as well as academic discussions with classmates, were important factors that increased interreligious understanding among students.

Many students commented on the open and accepting atmosphere on the Georgetown campus, crediting it with facilitating their own development of greater interreligious understanding:

“Georgetown has helped to increase my interreligious understanding within and outside the classroom. Without the combination of [academic] theory and religious diversity on campus, it would be very difficult to increase my understanding.”

A comparatively smaller number of students cited the importance of study-abroad experiences in increasing their interreligious understanding, often connecting them with prior studies on campus:

“As an Arabic major traveling to the Middle East, I have gained much understanding particularly into the Muslim faith and interfaith dialogue — Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.”

The majority of student comments regarding the value of study-abroad were written in response to Q25 (see below), the parallel question about intercultural understanding.

Finally, as expected among a group of 256 thoughtful, intelligent college seniors, several responses were more skeptical:

“Well, it’s not like if we said it increased our level of interreligious understanding, you would necessarily be able to quantify that or deliver results-based learning and understanding on interreligious religious issues. Most of this interaction is so contextual, relative, and circumstantial that what one person would think is a higher level of understanding would be common knowledge, or even bigoted, to another person.”

Overall, students thought interreligious understanding had increased due to their study of world religions or their own faith, and from discussing issues of religious belief with diverse students from a variety of faiths, as well as those of no faith.

**Summary of responses to Q24, Georgetown University’s Catholic and Jesuit heritage**

Although fewer than 42 percent of respondents self-identified as Catholic, this question received the most responses, and some of the longest ones, of the three reflection questions. One major and six minor themes emerged from students’ responses to this topic:

- Social justice/service/’men and women for others’ (43 responses)
- “Problem of God”/theology course requirement (41)
- Jesuit education/openness, intellectual curiosity (37)
- Curapersonalis/whole person emphasis (27)
- Opportunities to explore own/others’ faith/s (24)
- Sense of community/others with same values (20)
- Catholic masses/Jesuits’ homilies (18)

The Jesuit value of social justice and service, encapsulated in the phrase ‘men and women for others,’ resonates with many students. Typical comments included:

“Courses that explicitly incorporated concepts about men and women for others and social justice (“Civic Engagement and Education” and the “Biology Teaching Thesis”) were the courses that changed my world view and were an integral part of my Georgetown experience.”

While agreeing that social justice was an admirable value, however, a few students sought to separate it from the school’s Catholic and Jesuit heritage:

“Although I strongly believe in the ethos of empathy and social justice that are core tenets of the Jesuit mission, I equally strongly believe that these are principles that can also be found in secular thought and need not—indeed, ought not—be tied to religion.”

An almost equal number of students cited theology courses as an integral aspect of Georgetown’s Catholic/Jesuit heritage, though a few did not consider them a positive aspect:

“My family’s religious tradition is Shamanism, and my family is not very religious. Coming from a tradition which does not believe in gods, much less one almighty God, the Catholic-centric theology courses and lectures on campus do not pose much interest to me.”

Students who were neither Catholic nor Christian, or who held no religious beliefs, may have mildly criticized these courses, but they did not say the classes had no value or that the theology requirement should be removed from the curriculum. Instead, most students agreed that spirituality and morality were infused into the school curriculum through the theology courses, enabling students to think critically about these issues.

Student comments about their ‘Jesuit education,’ or the values they attributed to the Jesuit community (such as openness, intercultural and interreligious understanding, and intellectual curiosity), were almost uniformly positive. Examples included:

“Jesuits have allowed me to see the ways people can speak intelligently about religion without contradicting science or feeling the need to disrespect or judge others.”

Several students differentiated between the Jesuit and Catholic traditions, moreover, responding more positively to Jesuit values. According to one student:

“The Jesuit heritage was certainly a positive influence on my education, but I think that the high prevalence of Catholic tradition on campus is a polarizing force between students.”

This indicates that many students responded positively to an environment they interpreted as ‘Jesuit’ and were more critical of things they aligned more generally with ‘religion’ or ‘organized religion.’ This is interesting because as highlighted earlier, many students cited the ability to discern the nuances of religious traditions, including their own, as a significant part of their Georgetown education.

Student comments were uniformly positive and appreciative of the Jesuit value of cura personalis and the idea of educating the whole person. Typical comments included:

“I think the Catholic and Jesuit heritage have been reflected in my education by focusing on the whole person. My education has looked at not just topics that can help me get a career, but have allowed me to build up a moral and ethical understanding of my actions.”

Two students who self-identified as atheists nonetheless wrote positive comments about this Jesuit value:

“I ended up loving being at a Jesuit institution. I love the ‘cura personalis’ that we uphold and believe that Jesuit values have added a lot to my life without forcing me to believe in God.” [Asian American female, atheist]

“I think the Catholic and Jesuit heritage of Georgetown of the school was an important element of my Georgetown experience. The Jesuit philosophy of Cura Personalis has created a culture that you can only find at Georgetown, and therefore I surprisingly find the Jesuit identity of Georgetown very important.” [white Jewish male, atheist]

Based on their comments, students also valued the opportunities they found at Georgetown to explore their own faith, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of other religions. Some typical comments illustrating this view included the following:

“I enjoyed being at a Jesuit institution because I think it gave me the freedom to question my beliefs and not be questioned for that.”

“I grew up in an intensely secular family of mixed religious background (Jewish and Baptist), and religion was never presented as a matter of personal identity. Coming to Georgetown, I was forced to contend with questions about my background from other students that I had never even considered (I have a traditionally Jewish surname and Semitic appearance). In my conversations with other students as well as through theology classes, I have been able to explore religious perspectives outside my own.”

These comments seem to indicate that regardless of their faith tradition, or lack of one, students felt that because of Georgetown’s Jesuit heritage, they were able to explore their own and others’ beliefs in an atmosphere of openness, tolerance, and acceptance. Even those who ultimately grew in their own faith appreciated the atmosphere of openness at Georgetown that allowed them to question their beliefs and explore other spiritual paths.

From student remarks on the sense of community at Georgetown, specifically the presence of others with the same values, two very different views emerged. Some students reported that having others from their own faith tradition on campus provided community and a sense of shared values:

“The Catholic and Jesuit heritage was the most critical experience of my college education. The Catholic faith shaped the way I viewed my studies and brought a value deeper than pure intellectual pursuit. Being a Catholic
coming to Georgetown, this was definitely something I looked forward to.”

Some of these same students, however, expressed disappointment that the Catholic identity at Georgetown was not emphasized more:

“It was an important element of my decision to come to Georgetown and, subsequently, an important part of my experience, but I do wish the Catholic identity was more present on campus. I do not think Georgetown is commonly identified as a Catholic university, and part of me wishes this was more the case.”

These comments revealed the tension some students felt around the identity of the campus: some felt excluded by its overt Catholicism, as did the Jewish student described above, while others felt that the Catholic community was not as visible and vibrant as they had wished. This theme is revisited in the last set of comments in this section (below).

**Summary of responses to Q25, intercultural understanding**

The three major themes, as well as two of the minor themes, emerged from students’ responses to the question of whether or not their experiences at Georgetown University had increased their intercultural understanding. Personal interactions appeared to be most significant in encouraging cultural understanding, followed by classroom experiences and the diverse campus environment. Themes that student comments represented included:

- Personal interactions (66 responses)
- Coursework/classes (50)
- Campus diversity (49)
- Study abroad (16)
- Self-segregating campus (11)

Nearly one-third of the students who answered this question reported that personal interactions with roommates, friends, and classmates were a rich source of learning that increased their intercultural understanding. Among such responses were the following:

“I am in a friend group with all sorts of different people of different faiths, or no faith at all. I live, work, and study with these unique people and learn from them.”

“I have made many friends, especially from the Arab world, who come from different cultural and faith traditions than me. I have learned a great deal about cultural norms in other places and have come to examine certain practices in the US that I always took for granted.”

These reflections indicate that for many students, living and learning with a diverse group of people was more significant and effective in increasing cultural understanding than was the more academic engagement of other nations and cultures through classroom study.

The ethnic and national diversity of Georgetown’s campus community was another key factor that encouraged the development of intercultural understanding among students, as reported in comments such as these:

“Definitely being in a space both open to the contributions of different cultures/experiences and encouraging everyone to share and analyze these experiences, both critically and emotionally, has really helped me work through my understandings of culture, religion, and spirituality.”

“I have met people from around the world, but I have also seen the variety of cultures within the US itself and realized how different the cultures are in places like the northeast, Midwest, and Texas.”

Their reflections indicate that these students not only grew in their understanding of people from other nations, but also came to recognize that regional and ethnic groups within the United States have distinct cultural characteristics.

Not surprisingly, study abroad experiences were also mentioned as important sources of cultural learning:

“At Georgetown, opportunities are available to engage with other cultures, but the school does not push you to necessarily take these opportunities. Being abroad, however, I was forced to confront a different culture head on.”

“Abroad I grew more as a person than I ever thought possible.”

These comments reveal that while some students found only limited opportunities to grow in cultural understanding at home, experiences in other countries did fulfill that purpose for them.

In addition to the positive reports from students, however, several did candidly describe the Georgetown campus as ‘self-segregating,’ a characteristic that they felt impeded intercultural understanding. For example:

“A homogeneous culture exists in Georgetown social life, but not in the classroom. In class, I have a better intercultural understanding. Outside the classroom, I don’t believe I do.”

While these comments were in the minority, it is significant that the topic arose in more than one isolated remark. It is also worth noting that the reasons students gave for this opinion varied: some attributed it to their own feelings or behavior (“I myself have generally chosen…”), while others cited external factors (“you have to go out of your way”). Thus student perceptions of the openness of others, as well as their own willingness to engage, influenced their ability to grow in cultural awareness.
Taken as a whole, the comments above represent the collective reflections of the 256 students who responded to the survey in the spring of their senior year at Georgetown. Their accomplishments and successes, as well as their struggles and disappointments, speak of their shared and individual journeys towards the complexity of understanding and appreciating others who differ from them in significant ways.

Our original research plan included administration of an exit survey in the final year of the study (2011) in order to provide a comparison to the baseline data collected in the fall of 2007. Encouraged by the response we had received to the 2007 online survey, we constructed a second online survey for study participants in the spring of their senior year. This section describes the development and administration of that survey and compares its respondent demographics and response rate with those of the 2007 survey.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE EXIT SURVEY

We repeated several items from the 2007 initial survey on the exit survey to compare student responses at the beginning and end of their undergraduate career. In addition, we developed new questions based on ideas and issues raised by student conversations in the series of seven focus groups held during the previous three years.

Finally, based on the depth of discussion evident during the focus groups and interviews, we included three open-ended response questions on the survey. We were gratified by the genuine and honest responses these items elicited, providing yet another rich source of qualitative data. Accordingly, these exit survey written comments became a major source of evidence for student growth in interreligious and intercultural understanding and were analyzed thematically in conjunction with the focus groups, interviews, and reflection papers (see previous section).

EXIT SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

An invitation to complete the online exit survey was sent to the 460 fourth-year undergraduate students who had completed the 2007 initial survey. As with the initial survey, individual student identifiers were concealed during all data analysis in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

During the period it was open (April 5 – May 8, 2011), a total of 256 students completed the survey, yielding an overall response rate of 56 percent. This compares favorably with the 28.2 percent response rate achieved by the initial 2007 survey of all undergraduates in the Class of 2011 (1,634 students). The distribution of students among the four participating schools was similar in 2007 and 2011, though the relative percentages of students from Georgetown College and the School of Nursing and Health Studies increased slightly on the exit survey.

Table 3 (above) displays the numbers of respondents to the 2011 exit survey from each Georgetown school or college, while Table 4 (below) shows the relative change in participation from students in each school who responded to both the 2007 and 2011 surveys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Georgetown University School or College</th>
<th># responding to 2007 survey</th>
<th># responding to 2011 survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown College</td>
<td>225 (49%)</td>
<td>149 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Foreign Service</td>
<td>131 (28%)</td>
<td>54 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDonough School of Business</td>
<td>82 (18%)</td>
<td>26 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Nursing &amp; Health Studies</td>
<td>22 (5%)</td>
<td>27 (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Relative change in participation by school, 2007 – 2011

Among the 256 students responding to the exit survey, 66.7 percent self-identified as Female (170 students) and 32.5 percent self-identified as Male (83). Two respondents selected the Other category; one respondent skipped this item. By
comparison, the gender distribution in the 2007 survey population (460 students) was 59 percent female (273) and 41 percent male (187 students). The self-reported ethnic background of students was predominantly Caucasian/White, with 80 percent (199 students) selecting that category. However, as on the 2007 initial survey, there was a diverse group of students from a range of ethnic backgrounds responding in 2011, as shown above in Table 5.

The distribution of racial and ethnic backgrounds of the students responding to the 2011 exit survey was roughly similar to the general distribution of students responding to the initial survey in 2007, with slight increases in the proportions of Caucasian (+3.2%) and African American (+1.8%) respondents, and a modest decrease (-6.1%) in responses from Asian or Asian American students.

Finally, the survey requested respondents to select their religious orientation. A fairly diverse range of religious affiliations was reported, with the largest clusters of responses being Catholic (41.5%), Agnostic (17.7%), Protestant (14%), Atheist (12.9%), and Spiritual, not religious (8.9%). Table 6 below displays the distribution of respondents among the various categories of religious orientations listed on the survey.

Taken together, students who identified with one of the Christian faiths (Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, or other Christian) accounted for 61 percent of the survey respondents, while those from the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and other faith traditions (not listed) comprised only 10.5 percent of the respondents. In responding to this question, 39.5 percent of the students selected Atheist, Agnostic, or Spiritual, not religious. Thus the survey sample included a substantial proportion of students who did not identify with any particular religious tradition.

Accounting for the multiple selections for this item made by some respondents on the 2011 survey, the distribution of students among the Christian, other major religion, and no faith tradition groupings described above was essentially the same as on the 2007 initial survey: Christian faiths, 56 percent; other major faiths, 9 percent; and no faith tradition, 39.5 percent. Thus the relative proportion of respondents from the various religions, including those reporting no faith tradition, was preserved on the second survey. While the raw number of students responding to the exit survey decreased by nearly half, the fact that the demographic percentages (ethnicity, gender, and religious orientation) remained fairly constant allows for comparison between the two sets of survey results as describing essentially similar student populations.

Viewed from another perspective, 56 percent of the 2007 initial survey respondents also completed the 2011 exit survey, providing a comfortable pre/post sample of fully 15 percent of the original 1,634 entering students from the Class of 2011 who participated in both surveys. While we could argue that this group was a twice self-selected sample, it is significant that over one-third of the students did not claim any religious affiliation on either survey.

In addition to the items collecting respondent demographics, the exit survey consisted of three sets of questions: five items that were repeated from the 2007 initial survey, 12 new closed-format items that emerged from student comments and concerns during the focus groups and interviews, and three open-ended questions inviting short narrative responses or reflections. This section describes the findings from the 12 new exit survey questions; the five repeated measures are discussed in the comparison of the initial and exit surveys while the responses to the three open-ended questions were analyzed with the other qualitative sources (discussed in the previous section).
FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

A reflective approach to question development was employed throughout the study, enabling each subsequent study component to benefit from insights gained during the previous ones. This emergent approach also allowed us to elicit the student perspective so that questions on the exit survey would reflect the native categories of the respondents. It was for this reason that only five items were repeated from the initial survey, while 15 new ones (including three open-ended reflection prompts) were developed over the course of the qualitative data collection during the second and third years of the study. Student comments and observations, in turn, served as a corrective to the researchers’ original assumptions and biases, as the initial survey was constructed without any student input.

The 12 new scalar or choice questions included on the exit survey were designed to elicit three types of information from student respondents: how they felt about religion or people of faith; how they interacted socially with others on campus based on religious or cultural background; or how they demonstrated their reported beliefs through their behavior. Accordingly, each of these items represented one of three categories: attitude measures, indicators of student social behaviors, or commitment measures.

### Attitude measures

Six items on the survey were designed to assess student attitudes towards other faiths, their adherents, or religion in general. These questions (numbered according to the survey) were:

- **Q9.** Are you comfortable discussing religion in an academic setting?
- **Q11.** What are the most common reasons why you might discuss religion in a social (non-curricular) environment?
- **Q12.** Have you ever felt excluded or uncomfortable on campus because of your religious beliefs or lack thereof?
- **Q15.** How often do you invite friends to attend a religious service in your own faith tradition?
- **Q16.** If one of your classes offered an opportunity to visit a religious place of worship (outside your own) such as a church, mosque, temple etc. and attend a service but attendance was voluntary, would you participate?
- **Q20.** What are the reasons you might not associate with people from other religious or cultural backgrounds?

All of the students responding to these questions on the 2011 exit survey had also participated in the 2007 initial survey. Where applicable, the following discussion draws on those earlier results as context for the later ones and to allow comparison with responses four years later from a large group of the same students.

The exit survey included several items designed to assess the role of coursework on student development of religious knowledge and interreligious understanding. When students were asked on the 2007 survey about their knowledge of diverse religions, response patterns revealed relatively high confidence. 88 percent of the students reported that they had “already studied about religions other than my own,” while 62 percent agreed that they had “considerable knowledge about other religions.” In addition, 89 percent claimed that they could relate well to people of different races, nations, and religions. On the exit survey, 82 percent agreed that they were comfortable discussing religion in classes or other academic settings (Q9). The remainder chose a ‘No’ response, either because they lacked concrete information about religious tenets and beliefs (16%) or because while they have knowledge of other religions, they are simply uncomfortable with such discussions (2%). These results indicate that as entering first-year students, about two-thirds of those surveyed felt confident in their knowledge of other religions; four years later, over 80 percent felt comfortable discussing religion in class.

Based on the combined results of these questions from the initial and exit surveys, it appears that students retained their open attitude and interest in discussing religion during their undergraduate years, although it is not clear from these two items how much more knowledge of other religions students actually gained while at Georgetown.

A second attitude question on the exit survey (Q16) asked how likely the student would be to participate in an optional (voluntary) class visit to a religious place of worship. Nearly half (49.6%) of those responding to this item reported they would probably attend if possible. Another 44 percent said they would definitely attend. Fewer than 7 percent would decline to attend, either because they did not enjoy participating in religious events or because they would be uncomfortable attending a service outside their own tradition. These responses confirm that students had a strong interest in learning about other faiths, at least in conjunction with a course offering (see Table 7 below).

Other survey questions aimed to assess how willing students were to participate in religious events socially, outside of class activities. Before discussing these items, however, it is revealing to consider to what extent students felt excluded on campus based on their religious affiliations (Q12). When asked this question on the exit survey, fully 70 percent of those answering this item...
(177 students) responded ‘No, I have never felt uncomfortable or excluded on campus.’ Fifty-one of these students self-identified as a member of a minority religion, while the remaining 126 responding positively reported that they were part of a majority religion.

By contrast, 30 percent of respondents to this item (a total of 80 students) agreed that they felt excluded or uncomfortable on campus due to their religious beliefs. Equal numbers of majority religion members and atheist or agnostic students (29 and 28 respectively) reported being uncomfortable because of their faith or lack of belief, as well as a smaller number from minority religions (23 students) who also felt excluded on campus. It is interesting to note that when the results are analyzed according to the religious affiliations of the respondents, the proportions of both the minority religion students and the atheist or agnostic students who did feel accepted on campus were similar to the overall response rate of 70 percent who felt comfortable. Of those who responded to this item as minority religion students, 68.9 percent reported feeling accepted or comfortable on campus, while at 63 percent the proportion of atheist or agnostic students was only slightly lower. These results demonstrate that the majority of students felt welcome on campus, regardless of their beliefs (Table 8, right).

Having established the social context on campus in terms of how accepted and comfortable students felt about their religious faith or lack of belief, we now turn to several items dealing with student attitudes revealed in their relations with others on campus. In order to gain insight into how students learned about religion informally through interactions with their friends outside of classes, the survey asked about the most common reasons why students might discuss religion socially (Q11). The most popular reason by far (78.4%) was ‘news item or politics.’ This is not surprising, as in the 2007 survey 60 percent reported discussing religion with friends regularly and 74 percent reported discussing politics regularly. Moreover, on the initial survey fully 80 percent expressed interest in “studying about religion’s role in politics and world affairs.” Considering the location of the university in the nation’s capital and that nearly a third of the exit survey respondents were enrolled in either the School of Foreign Service or the School of Business, their interest in

Table 8. Ever felt excluded on campus due to religious beliefs

Table 9. Reasons for discussing religion socially
discussing religion as it emerged in political affairs or current events was not unexpected.

Other reasons for discussing religion that students chose on the exit survey included:
- some of my friends are religious (60%);
- assigned readings or homework (50%);
- I enjoy discussing religion (48%);
- campus cultural or religious events (47%);
- my friends enjoy discussing religion (43%);
- I am religious (23%).

These results reveal that while class assignments and campus events can raise the topic of religion, the interests and attitudes of friends also contribute strongly for discussing religion socially. Table 9 on the previous page displays these results graphically.

A second survey question that probed student attitudes about religious faith asked them how often they invited friends to attend a religious service in their own faith tradition. Despite the apparent interest most students have in learning about other religions, the response most frequently chosen on this item was “Rarely. Only on a special religious holiday/event” (35.7% of respondents). The second most frequently chosen response was “Never. I don’t attend services” (20.8%), followed by “Sometimes. I prefer to attend services with my own religious community” (17.3%).

When responses were analyzed according to the religious orientation of the students, however, a slightly different picture emerged. For those who identified as Catholic, Protestant, other Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, the frequency of response choices was first, “Rarely,” followed by “Sometimes” as second choice. However, for those students who identified as Jewish, agnostic, atheist, or spiritual (not religious), the most frequent response choice was

Table 10. Frequency of inviting friends to your religious services

When responses were analyzed according to the religious orientation of the students, however, a slightly different picture emerged. For those who identified as Catholic, Protestant, other Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, the frequency of response choices was first, “Rarely,” followed by “Sometimes” as second choice. However, for those students who identified as Jewish, agnostic, atheist, or spiritual (not religious), the most frequent response choice was

Table 11. Reasons for not associating with culturally different people
the two “Never” choices (“I don’t attend services” or “I have no religious tradition”), followed by “Rarely.” These response patterns indicate that regardless of faith tradition, or lack of religious affiliation, students in general rarely invite others to their own services (Table 10). This result is a bit surprising, in view of the student interest in attending other religious events and services demonstrated by their comments during the focus groups and interviews (discussed earlier).

In order to shed light on student reticence in inviting others to their religious services, we turn to the results of a survey question intended to elicit student attitudes towards others who were from a different culture or religion than their own. This item asked students to select the reasons they “might not associate with people from other religious or cultural backgrounds,” allowing them to choose as many as applied (Q20).

The results to this item were complex but illuminating. Fewer than 5 percent of the 254 students responding to this item chose the ‘Strongly Agree’ point on the scale for any of the four response choices (see Table 11 above). The most frequently chosen reason for which students did select ‘Agree’ (37%) was “I am more relaxed around people from my own culture/religion.” In fact, this was the only response choice for which the ‘Agree’ responses were highest; for the other three choices, the highest response values were ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree.’ Two of these other response choices received a smaller proportion of ‘Agree’ responses as the second highest response to that choice: “I don’t know too many people from other religions and/or cultural backgrounds’ (22.8% agreed) and “There is a linguistic barrier which makes communication difficult” (24.4% agreed). However, the most frequent response category selected for “I don’t know too many people” was ‘Disagree,’ at 38.6 percent—the same proportion as chose ‘Strongly Disagree’ for “There is a linguistic barrier.”

The fact that students responded by disagreeing—often strongly—with the survey response choices could indicate that the offered choices simply did not align with students’ reasons for not associating with culturally different others. Alternatively, this response pattern could indicate that the majority of those participating in the survey were in fact comfortable interacting with people from other religions and backgrounds, and thus disagreed with the offered response choices.

**Social Behaviors measures**

Three items on the survey were designed to assess student social behaviors indicative of their attitudes towards other faiths and their adherents. These questions (numbered according to the survey) were:

- Q10. How often do you discuss religion with friends in a social (non-curricular) setting?
- Q18. How often do you attend cultural events (dramatic performances, lectures, musical events) on campus?
- Q19. How often do you associate with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds?

Based on the attitude questions discussed above, it seems that the majority of the students responding to the exit survey were comfortable discussing religion, interested in learning about other faiths, and were not uncomfortable interacting with students of other faiths or cultural backgrounds. In order to gather evidence for the accuracy of these self-reported attitudes as exhibited in relevant social behavior, we asked students how often they discussed religion with their friends socially (Q10). Nearly two-thirds (62.5%) chose ‘Sometimes,’ while fewer than half as many chose either ‘Rarely’ (27.3%) or ‘Never’ (2.3%). Fewer than 10 percent said they discussed religion with their friends ‘All the time’ (9.8%). These results align with student responses to the attitude measures regarding their interest and confidence in discussing religion and their ease in interacting with others on campus. Table 12 below displays the results to this item.

The final social behavior measure asked students how often they...
associated with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds (Q19). Considering the diversity of the campus student population, the results to this item (Table 13) were not surprising: fully 70 percent of the survey respondents reported interacting regularly with people from backgrounds differing from their own. Another 26 percent agreed they had such interactions ‘often,’ while only about 5 percent said they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ associated with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds.

These results are interesting, as in a previously discussed attitude measure (Q20) fully 25 percent agreed or agreed strongly that ‘I don’t know too many people from other religions and/or cultural backgrounds.’ One interpretation of this response pattern is that due to the diversity of the student body, students do interact regularly in classes and dorms with people different from themselves, but may not associate with them closely. The fact that students reported low levels of discomfort with diverse others (7.5%) and a more relaxed attitude around similar peers (38.6%; see discussion of Q20 above) lends support to this interpretation.

### Commitment measures

The final category of new items on the exit survey was the commitment measures. These three items were designed to assess student commitment to actually engaging in behaviors relevant to religious faith that they had indicated they would engage in or were important to them. These questions (numbered according to the survey) were:

- **Q8.** Did you make it a point to study religious traditions outside of your own faith while at Georgetown?
- **Q13.** How often do you attend religious services in your own faith tradition?
- **Q14.** How often do you attend religious services outside your own tradition?

Given the interest in other religions reported by students on the initial survey in 2007, as well as their apparent continuing interest based on the exit survey attitude measures discussed above, we wanted to know how many of the students in the study had actually taken courses about other religions while at Georgetown (Q8). The overwhelming majority of students agreed that they had studied about other religions, with only 4.4 percent reporting that they ‘only took classes in my faith tradition.’ Nearly 60 percent (148 students) said they had studied about both their own and other faiths, while another 20.3 percent said they had studied other faiths ‘only tangentially.’ By contrast, 3.6 percent of the survey respondents said they studied other religions because ‘there are not classes offered in my faith tradition,’ while another 16.3 percent said they did so because ‘I have no faith tradition’ (Table 14).

However, because all students were required to take at least two theology courses, we wanted to know how many majority religion students—especially those in the Christian group—took courses about faiths other than their own. When the responses to this item were filtered by the religious orientation of the students, an interesting picture emerged. The variety of courses offered by the Department of Theology makes it quite possible for Christian students to take only courses in their own faith tradition. However, nearly two-thirds of the Christian group students answering this question said they had taken courses about other religions as well as their own, indicating that they had carried out their intention of learning about other religions while at Georgetown. Of the 251 students answering this item, 147 (58.5%) had self-identified with one of the Christian faiths; 94 of those reported that they had taken classes that taught about other faith traditions as well as their own.

The remaining 54 students who took classes about other faiths were from non-Christian religions or did not identify with any religious tradition. While students of no religion would clearly be required to study faith traditions outside their own beliefs, one or more courses on Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism are generally offered by the Department of Theology. Thus students of those faiths could choose to study their own tradition once they had taken the introductory “Problem of God” course. As students were required to take at least two theology courses, and those adhering to a minority tradition or no religion would by definition be taking courses outside their own tradition, these responses indicate that students did indeed pursue their intention to study other religions.

The results to this item were mixed, with several of the survey choices receiving similar proportions of the total number of responses. For example, while the highest number of students indicated that they attended their own religious services ‘only on special events or religious holidays’ (26.2%), nearly as many (20.3%) selected ‘once a week or more.’ In addition, similar...
numbers chose either a ‘few times a month’ (16.4%), ‘every couple of months’ (15.2%), or ‘non-applicable’ (14.8%), while a slightly smaller percentage chose ‘never’ (12.1%). Table 15 displays the overall response rates for each option on this item.

Filtering by the religious orientation of students, however, revealed substantial variation in behavior across groups. One-third of the Christian group students attended their own services ‘once a week or more.’ This is not surprising, due to the number and frequency of Catholic and other Christian services offered on campus. The percentages of Christian group students attending their own services ‘a few times a month,’ ‘every couple of months,’ or ‘only on religious holidays’ were 10 percent lower but virtually identical, at 23.2 percent, 20.5 percent, and 23.2 percent respectively. Fewer than 5 percent of the Christian group students selected ‘never.’ With 56.2 percent attending services twice a month or more, then, it appears that this group of students was reasonably committed to practicing their faith.

By contrast, a very different picture emerged from students in the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim group who answered this question (N=26). The most frequent response by far from these students was ‘only on special events or religious holidays,’ at 53.8 percent more than twice the overall response rate for the same option on this item (26.2%). This group’s response levels for the ‘few times a month,’ ‘every couple of months,’ and ‘never’ options were roughly comparable to the overall item response levels for those choices (see Table 16).

However, one Jewish student chose ‘once a week or more’ and one Buddhist student selected ‘not applicable,’ as compared to the overall item response levels from the larger group of 20.3 percent and 14.8 percent respectively for these two choices. The lack of services and sacred spaces for the non-Abrahamic traditions probably contributed significantly to the response patterns for the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim student respondents. Due to the lack of opportunity to practice their faith publicly on campus, it is not appropriate to speculate on the depth of the

Table 15. How often students attended services in their own faith tradition

Table 16. Responses from Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, & Muslim students
faith commitment of students in this group. However, individual student comments drawn from the qualitative data sources indicate that if worship opportunities were available on campus, this group may well have confirmed higher levels of faith commitment.

Finally, of the 74 students answering this item who had self-identified as either atheist or agnostic, only 5 chose either ‘once a week or more,’ ‘a few times a month,’ or ‘every couple of months’—four of these students identified as agnostic. Interestingly, the fifth response was an outlier, an atheist student who chose ‘once a week or more.’ By far the most frequent response, however, was ‘non-applicable’ at 45.9 percent, followed by about half as many students choosing either ‘only on special events’ or ‘never’ in equal numbers (25.7% for each response option). As nearly three-quarters of the students in this group chose ‘never’ or ‘non-applicable’ in response to how often they attended religious services, their response pattern is entirely consistent with commitment to their belief system as non-religious individuals.

The final exit survey commitment measure assessed student levels of participation in religious services outside their own traditions, as an indicator of their interest in learning about other faiths. This question simply asked students how often they attended religious services outside their own tradition (Q14). At 51.2 percent of the responses, the most frequently selected option was ‘Rarely. Only if invited by a good friend for a special religious holiday/event.’ None of the other response options received more than 15% of the total responses (see Table 17).

Only two students answered ‘Regularly. I enjoy attending diverse religious services,’ the least frequently chosen response; five students chose ‘Never. I decline even if invited because I am nervous of making a mistake’; and seven selected ‘Often. If my friends belong to a tradition outside my own and are attending a service, I usually join them.’ The remaining four choices each received between 8 percent and 15 percent of the total responses to this item.

These response patterns are somewhat surprising in view of the students’ stated interest in learning about other faiths. However, considering that nearly 70 percent of the students reported attending services in their own faith tradition only ‘every couple of months’ or less frequently (Q13), lack of attendance in other traditions is more understandable. Moreover, fully 60 percent reported attending campus cultural events (Q18) at about the same rate, or once every few months. With the many campus organizations, activities, and competing distractions students are faced with, it appears that attendance at services outside their own faith tradition is not an accurate measure of student interest in other religions.

Taken together, then, the results of the three items designed as commitment measures indicate that academic study of other religions is a stronger indicator of student interest than attendance at religious services, either one’s own or the services of other faiths.

Table 17. How often students attended services of other faiths
traditions. There are several reasons why this might be the case. First, all students at Georgetown are required to take two theology courses, giving even those who are not religiously inclined an opportunity to learn something about religion and/or an unfamiliar faith. Second, class discussions of religion may appear more objective to students than participation in others’ services. Moreover, it is easier to ‘make a mistake’ and possibly offend someone at a worship service, while in class it is permissible, even encouraged, to ask questions and disagree, if done respectfully and civilly. Finally, while many Catholic services and a few other Christian ones are offered on campus, the availability of worship services and sacred spaces is very uneven across the spectrum of faith traditions represented at Georgetown. Consequently, even students who may wish to attend their own or other’s services may not have that opportunity, thus obscuring the true level of student interest in attending services.

Having reviewed the results of these 12 new exit survey items individually, we now turn to an in-depth analysis of selected survey items filtered by respondent demographics or cross-tabulated by student responses to other questions. Having reviewed the general results of the unique items on the exit survey (those not repeated from the 2007 initial survey), we now turn to an in-depth analysis of student responses to selected questions drawn from the entire set of survey questions. In order to accurately interpret the quantitative survey results, several research questions drawn from the overall study design were applied to the data and addressed through filtered responses and cross-tabulations. These research questions included:

• How does knowledge about other faiths affect student attitudes towards those faiths and their adherents?
• How do students’ attitudes towards people of other faiths, or no faith, affect their personal (social) interactions with those people and their faiths?
• How do students’ personal (social and academic) interactions with people of other faiths, or no faith, affect students’ own religious beliefs?

Based on the results of these interrelationships of specific subsets of the survey data, in several cases a different picture emerged than the one presented by the overall survey responses to the separate individual questions.

How knowledge about other faiths affects student attitudes

To address the first question, we selected survey Q8 as the control variable: “Did you make it a point to study religious traditions outside of your own faith while at Georgetown?” Student responses to this item, previously discussed as a commitment measure, were compared with their responses to four related survey questions:

Q9. Are you comfortable discussing religion in an academic setting?
Q14. How often do you attend religious services outside your own tradition?
Q15. How often do you invite friends to attend a religious service in your own faith tradition?
Q16. If one of your classes offered an opportunity to visit a religious place of worship (outside your own) such as a church, mosque, temple, etc., and attend a service but attendance was voluntary, would you participate?

The objective of this analysis was to assess whether and to what extent students who increased their academic knowledge of other faiths were more likely to attend worship services in their own and other faiths and to invite friends to join them at their own services.

The first comparison in this series found that 88 percent (130 students) of those responding ‘Yes, I took classes about my own faith and others’ (Q8) also selected ‘I think I have enough knowledge about certain religions to discuss my thoughts’ (Q9). Of the 41 students reporting no faith tradition on Q8, 31 also selected this response to Q9, as well as 39 of the 51 who responded ‘Sort of’ to Q8 (focus of classes was their own religion). In addition, 42 of the 45 students who answered ‘No, I’m not comfortable discussing religion in class because I lack information’ (Q9) reported that they had taken classes in other faith traditions.

Combining the results from these two items (Q8 and Q9) indicates that the great majority of students surveyed (93%) reported having studied about faiths other than their own (even if only tangentially), and that 83.6 percent also agreed they were comfortable discussing religion in class. These results confirm stu-
The next two comparisons found no significant differences in the self-reported behaviors of students who had studied other religions and those who had not. The first of these looked for an association between studying other religions and how often students attended religious services outside their own traditions (Q14). As in the overall survey results for this question, by far the most frequently chosen response in the cross-tabulation was ‘Rarely,’ at 54 percent substantially the same as the overall frequency of 51 percent. Likewise, the second and third most frequent choices for the cross-tabulation, ‘Never’ (14.8%) and ‘Sometimes, if invited’ (11%), were comparable to the overall single item response rates of 14.5 percent and 11.3 percent respectively. As discussed previously in the section on commitment measures, students’ academic study of other religions does not necessarily lead to their personal participation in diverse religious services or practices.

Similarly, a related comparison asked if there was a relationship between studying other religions (Q8) and how often students invited friends to attend their own worship services (Q15). The distribution of cross-tabulated responses again mirrored roughly the overall distribution for Question 8 alone. An interesting finding from this and the previous comparison, however, was that students’ invitations to friends to attend their own services are not always reciprocated by actual student participation in services outside their own faith traditions. When comparing the ‘sometimes’ or more often responses to either question, the number of those reporting invitations in Q15 (74) was higher than the number of those reporting their own attendance at others’ services in Q14 (59).

The final cross-tabulation in this series analyzed whether studying other religions (Q8) encouraged students to participate in a class visit to a religious place of worship (Q16). While the most frequent response to this question overall was ‘Yes, if possible (but not a priority),’ when cross-tabulated according to the extent to which students studied religions outside of their own, a slightly different picture emerged. Students who had reported studying other religions, including those who said there were no classes offered in their own faith tradition, were 10 percent more likely to choose the ‘Yes, I really enjoy learning about other religions’ response to Question 16 than students overall. By contrast, those who had no faith tradition, those who had studied other faiths only tangentially, and those who only studied about their own faith were more likely to choose the ‘Yes, if possible (but not a priority)’ response option to this question. While these results indicate a modest relationship between the two behaviors, it is not clear whether studying other religions encourages students to visit places of worship, or whether students who were already more likely to make such visits therefore also chose to study other religions in college.

In summary, then, this series of comparisons confirmed students’ reported confidence in their knowledge of other faiths...
and their relative comfort in discussing religion in academic settings.

As noted earlier, increased knowledge of other faiths does not predictably lead to student attendance at religious services outside their own faiths; however, students who studied other religions were more likely to participate in class-sponsored visits to diverse places of worship. Moreover, there was no clear correspondence between student invitations to friends to attend their own services and actual participation in such services outside their own. Thus it appears that while increasing academic knowledge of diverse religions increases student confidence and willingness to discuss those religions in class, it does not appreciably increase in religious services. Finally, these findings raise the question of how important participation in religious services is for this generation. During the focus group sessions and individual interviews, students had also commented that attending Mass was a ‘social activity,’ a place where they could spend time with friends and peers. It is likely, therefore, that some students, attending services is more social than religious and may not carry the same significance that it did for previous generations.

How student attitudes towards people of other faiths affect social interactions with those people and their faiths

The second research question focused on how student attitudes affect social interactions with people of other religions. We selected two of the response choices from Q20 (“What are the reasons you might not associate with people from other religious or cultural backgrounds?”) as the control variables: ‘I am uncomfortable with people from other religions and/or cultural backgrounds because I am not familiar with their religion/culture’ and ‘I am more relaxed around people from my own culture/religion.’ In this comparison, results are reported for students who agreed or agreed strongly (as a combined percentage) to one of the two Q20 response choices listed above. Students selecting one of these two choices were then compared according to their responses to the following three questions:

Q10. How often do you discuss religion with friends in a social (non-curricular) setting?
Q11. What are the most common reasons why you might discuss religion in a social (non-curricular) environment?
19. How often do you associate with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds?

This series of cross-tabulations aimed to reveal if there was a relationship between students’ comfort level with diverse others and their frequency of interactions with such individuals.

The first cross-tabulation showed that there were no significant differences between student responses to how often they discussed religion with friends (Q10), based on their reported reasons for not associating with culturally or religiously diverse others (Q20). Of the 218 students who disagreed that they were uncomfortable with people from other cultural or religious backgrounds, 64 percent (140) reported discussing religion with friends ‘sometimes.’ Similarly, 63 percent (88) of the 139 students who disagreed that they were more relaxed around people from their own culture or religion also reported discussing religion with friends ‘sometimes.’ Of the 98 students who agreed that they were more relaxed around similar others, roughly the same proportion, 62 percent (61 students), reported discussing religion with friends ‘sometimes.’ The overall result of this comparison, then, showed that students discussed religion with friends ‘sometimes,’ regardless of their reported comfort level with culturally or religiously different others. Thus there was no clear relationship between frequency of discussing religion and students’ level of comfort with diverse peers.

There were only a few slight differences between student responses to why they might discuss religion socially (Q11), based on their reported comfort level with culturally or religiously diverse others (Q20). The most common reason selected overall on Question 11 was ‘news item or politics’ (78%), followed by ‘It might come up because some of my friends are religious’ (59%). Of the 218 students who disagreed that they were uncomfortable with people from other cultural or religious backgrounds, 77 percent (168) also chose ‘news item or politics’ as the most common reason to discuss religion with friends. Similarly, 81 percent (112) of the 139 students who disagreed that they were more relaxed with others similar to themselves (Q20) also selected ‘news item or politics’ as the most common reason they discussed religion socially. The response patterns for the other options to this question were essentially similar across both groups of students, as categorized according to their responses to Q20, comfort level with diverse others. These patterns also closely mirrored the overall distribution of responses to Q11 (reasons for discussing religion socially). Thus it appears that students might discuss religion among friends for fairly similar reasons, regardless of their comfort level with others who are culturally different from themselves. In fact, a news item or political conversation that engages religion is probably one common denominator among a diverse group of Georgetown students and one way to discuss without judgment the role of religion in contemporary society.

The final comparison in this series looked at the frequency of students’ association with diverse peers (Q19), based on their self-reported comfort level with culturally different others (Q20). As in the previous cross-tabulation, the response patterns to this question were essentially similar across both groups of students, regardless of reported comfort level with others. These patterns were also comparable to the overall distribution of responses to Q19 (frequency of association with those of other cultures or religions). Whatever their comfort level, students chose the response ‘associate regularly’ at frequencies ranging from 65 percent to 82 percent, making it the most commonly selected response option by far (Tables 19 and 20).
Even students who reported discomfort interacting with diverse others, or who agreed they were more relaxed around people similar to themselves, chose the ‘associate regularly’ option much more often than any other response. In this comparison, then, the majority of students reported regular association with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds, whether or not they were in fact comfortable interacting with diverse others. Thus it appears that in Georgetown’s diverse campus community, regular academic or social contact with peers from other religions or cultures was not related to comfort level. Conversely, as seen in the earlier discussion of commitment measures, students’ reported ease in interacting with religiously diverse others did not necessarily translate into participation in religious services outside their own traditions.

To summarize, this series of comparisons did not find any specific relationships between students’ comfort level with those of other faiths or cultures and their frequency of interaction with those individuals. Independent of comfort level, students overwhelmingly reported regular interactions with culturally different peers or those from other religions. Students also reported discussing religion with friends ‘sometimes,’ and for similar reasons.

How students’ personal interactions with people of other faiths, or no faith, affect students’ own religious beliefs

To examine the third research question, we chose Question 7 (‘I consider myself deeply religious’) as the independent variable, again selecting two of the response options for cross-tabulation: ‘Interacting with people who practice different religions than my own strengthens my own religious belief and practice’ and ‘Interacting with people who practice different religions than my own causes me to question my own religious belief and practice.’ As in the previous comparison, results are reported for students who agreed or agreed strongly (as a combined percentage) to each of the two Q7 response choices just listed. Students selecting one of these choices were then compared according to their responses to the following two survey items:

Q17. For each of the following statements about religious beliefs, indicate your level of agreement.

Q21. Please check all that apply. My religious beliefs have changed most profoundly due to: [select from 14 factors].

This analysis was designed to explore what effect (if any) student interactions with those of similar or divergent belief systems had on students’ own religious beliefs. Responses to these two items (Q17 and Q21) were also filtered according to the self-reported religious orientation of student respondents in order to reveal any significant or notable differences in levels of agreement among the various groups.

The first cross-tabulation showed that for four of the choices to Q17 (statements about religion), the responses of students whose faith was strengthened by interacting with those of other faiths differed markedly from the responses of those who questioned their own beliefs after such interactions. Students who reported that their own beliefs were strengthened agreed (or strongly agreed) more than twice as often (49%) that ‘only religious belief can explain the deepest mysteries of life’ than did those who reported that interaction with other faiths caused them to question their own beliefs (22%). The ‘strengthen’ group was also much more likely to agree that ‘prayer can change the course of my life and events’ (68%) than was the ‘question’ group (44%). Finally, while for both groups it was a minority response, 26 percent of the students in the ‘strengthen’ group agreed that ‘my religious beliefs are superior to others, because they are right,’ while only 7.4 percent of the ‘question’ group students agreed with this statement. These response patterns contrasted with the overall survey response level of 14 percent who agreed with the statement that ‘my religious beliefs are superior.’

While the great majority of both groups agreed that ‘different religious traditions open up valuable alternative perspectives for me,’ the ‘question’ group students were even more like-
ly to agree (97%) than were the ‘strengthen’ group students (84%). These results compare with the overall survey response rate of 85 percent who agreed with this statement, indicating that the ‘question’ group students reported significantly more openness to the value of interacting with diverse others than did survey respondents in general, or those in the ‘strengthen’ group.

The response patterns from this series of cross-tabulations indicate that students in the ‘strengthen’ group may have been more firm in their religious beliefs, as they were more likely than other students to agree that prayer can change the course of events, that only religion can explain life’s mysteries, and that their own religious beliefs were superior to others. Their firmness of belief may have caused these students to be less influenced by discussions...
or interactions with those holding different beliefs. Students in the ‘question’ group, however, appear to have been more fluid in their beliefs, with the result that they were more open to questioning those beliefs when confronted with a different religious perspective. These students agreed more strongly than the survey average that other religions open up valuable alternative perspectives; moreover, they disagreed more strongly than the survey average that their own beliefs were superior to others. It appears, then, that the effect of student interactions with those of similar or divergent belief systems depends upon the extent to which students are either confirmed in their own religious beliefs or open to learning about the beliefs of others.

The second comparison analyzed whether students’ perceptions of their interactions with those of other faiths (Q7) are related to factors that caused profound changes in the students’ own religious beliefs (Q21). For example, students who reported that interaction with other faiths caused them to question their own beliefs also agreed (or strongly agreed) much more often (82%) that their religious beliefs have changed due to new ideas encountered in class than did those who reported that their own beliefs were strengthened by interacting with people of another religion (60%). These results compare to the overall survey response level of 58 percent agreement to this statement, which was 24 percent lower than the ‘question’ group’s level of agreement.

By contrast, students in the ‘strengthen’ group agreed more often (53%) that their religious beliefs have changed due to their positive reaction to their parents’ religious practices than did those in the ‘question’ group (38%, the same level as the overall survey responses). The ‘strengthen’ group students also agreed more often (23%) that September 11th and the threat of terrorism had changed their religious beliefs profoundly, while only 15 percent of the ‘question’ group agreed with this statement, again the same level as the overall survey responses.

Students in the ‘question’ group also agreed 10 percent to 15 percent more often than the ‘strengthen’ group that their religious beliefs had changed due to six of the other response choices offered in Question 21.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response option</th>
<th>‘Question’ group</th>
<th>‘Strengthen’ group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a debate with a person from a different background</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conversations with persons of different religions</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a trip to a foreign country</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploring the role of religion in US politics</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 24. Comparison of ‘question’ and ‘strengthen’ group responses, Q21 by Q7

On all other response choices to Q21, the ‘strengthen’ and ‘question’ group student response levels were similar. In summary, this series of cross-tabulations found that students in the ‘question’ group were much more likely than the survey average to agree that their religious beliefs have changed profoundly due to new ideas encountered in class. The ‘question’ group were also more likely than the ‘strengthen’ group to report changes in their religious beliefs due to conversations with people from other backgrounds and religions, a trip to another country, the influence of a professor, exploring the role of religion in US politics, as well as negative reaction to their parents’ religious practices. Thus it seems that students whose religious beliefs were less fixed were more open to multiple perspectives offered by interaction with diverse others and new experiences, while students who were more firm or comfortable in their beliefs were less likely to be influenced by such exposure.

Finally, when student responses to Q17 (statements about religious belief) and Q21 (influences on religious beliefs) were filtered according to the self-reported religious orientation of respondents, some notable differences in levels of agreement among the various groups emerged. Responses were divided into 3 groups: the ‘Christian’ group (61.2% of respondents), including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, and other Christian; the ‘BHJM’ group (10.5%), including Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim; and the ‘AANR’ group (39.5%), including atheist, agnostic, and spiritual, not religious (or no religion).

Based on their self-categorized religious orientation, students responded in markedly different ways to several of the response options to Q17. Two response choices showed significant deviation from the survey average in the responses of all three groups. For example, 32 percent of all survey respondents agreed that ‘Only religious belief can explain the deepest mysteries of life.’ However, when responses were filtered by religious orientation, a different picture emerged. Nearly 49 percent of the Christian group agreed, or about 17 percent higher than the survey average level of agreement. By contrast, the BHJM group registered far less agreement: 15 percent, or 17.3 percent below the survey average. Not surprisingly, the AANR group showed even greater disagreement: only 4.5 percent agreed with the statement, putting this group’s agreement level 27.8 percent below the survey average.

The second contested response, ‘Prayer can change the course of events,’ revealed even greater differences of opinion among the three groups of respondents. Of the Christian group re-
spondents, 70 percent agreed that prayer could change events in their lives, or 22.6 percent higher than the survey average of 47.4 percent. Only 35 percent of the BHJM group, however, agreed with the statement, placing their level of agreement 12.4 percent below the survey average. Finally, as would be expected, the AANR group displayed the most disagreement with the statement, with only 8 percent agreeing, or 39.4 percent lower than the survey average.

With the exception of three additional response options (‘All religions manifest some truth,’ ‘All life is sacred,’ and ‘My religious beliefs are superior’), all three groups’ levels of agreement were within 5 percentage points of each other and the survey averages on the other response options to Question 17. The BHJM group showed about 7 percent less agreement and the AANR about 8 percent less, to the statement that ‘All religions manifest some truth.’ The BHJM group also agreed about 7 percent less strongly than the average that ‘All life is sacred.’ Finally, the Christian group was the only one of the three that showed a slightly higher level of agreement than the survey average to the statement ‘My religious beliefs are superior to others, because they are right.’ A few more than 17 percent of the students in this group agreed with the statement, 3.2 percent more than the survey average. By contrast, only 8 percent of both the BHJM and the AANR groups agreed with the statement, or 5.8 percent lower than the survey average level of agreement, and a 9 percentage point difference from the Christian group’s response level.

In summary, then, students in the Christian group agreed most strongly that only religious beliefs can explain life’s deepest mysteries, as well as that prayer can change events in their lives. Students in the BHJM group were less than half as likely as those in the Christian group to agree with these statements, while those in the AANR group registered strong disagreement to both statements. These results indicate that generally speaking, Christian students appear to believe more strongly in the effects of prayer in their lives and the explanatory power of religious belief. In addition, these students were slightly more likely than those in the other two groups to agree that their religious beliefs were superior to the beliefs of others.

Having compared students in the three groups on their general views about religious belief, we then compared the groups’ responses to Q21, factors that had most profoundly changed students’ religious beliefs. There was noticeable variation in student agreement to only one response choice regarding important influences on students’ religious beliefs in college. Christian group students were 3 times more likely than those in the BHJM group—and nearly 4 times more likely than AANR students—to report that their beliefs were influenced by a campus minister or chaplain. This is not surprising, in that there were not campus ministers or chaplains available for all of the non-Christian faiths, and of course would be none for students in the AANR group.

Perhaps more interesting was the finding that on four of the
possible influences on their beliefs, students in the BHJM group reported levels of agreement 10 percent or more below the overall survey average level of agreement. These included:

• ‘A debate with a person of a different background’
  BHJM, 11.6 percent below average
• ‘Conversations with persons of different religions’
  BHJM, 17.3 percent below average
• ‘Influence of a professor’
  BHJM, 13 percent below average
• ‘Influence of a close friend’
  BHJM, 10 percent below average

Students in the AANR group also reported levels of agreement 9 percent below the survey average for this last choice, ‘Influence of a close friend.’

Conversely, students in the AANR group agreed 9.5 percent more often than average that ‘Exploring the role of religion in American politics’ had a profound effect on their beliefs. Finally, when student responses in the AANR group were compared with those in the BHJM and Christian groups, more than 10 percentage points separated group levels of agreement that the events of September 11th and terrorism had profoundly influenced students’ religious beliefs. The highest level of agreement came from the BHJM group at 20 percent, or 4.5 percent above the survey average of 15.5 percent. This result is not unexpected, considering that this group included the Muslim students responding to the survey. Moreover, the level of agreement from the Christian group was similar, at 19 percent (3.5% above average), while the least agreement came from the AANR group at 7 percent, or fully 8.5 percent below the survey average. As a result, there was a 12 percentage point spread in levels of agreement between the students in the BHJM and Christian groups as compared with those in the AANR group. Thus it appears that students who questioned religious faith, or followed no faith tradition, took a greater interest in the relationship between politics and religion; moreover, they may have been less convinced than students of faith that 9/11 was an act of ‘religious terrorism’ and therefore their belief system was less influenced by the threat of terrorism.

To summarize, this analysis explored the effects on students’ religious beliefs arising from interactions with those of diverse faith traditions. Factors most likely to influence students’ religious beliefs included the following:

• the self-reported religious orientation of student respondents;
• the extent to which students were either confirmed in their own religious beliefs or open to learning about the beliefs of others;
• the tendency to question their own faith when interacting with those of different religions, resulting in more openness to the value of associating with diverse others;
• the inclination to view exposure to other faiths as reaffirming their own beliefs, resulting in less influence from the multiple perspectives offered by interaction with diverse others.

We now turn to a comparison of the results to questions from the 2007 initial survey that were repeated on the 2011 exit survey.

Of the 460 students responding to the fall 2007 survey, 56 percent also completed the spring 2011 survey, yielding a comparison group of 256 students who had participated in both surveys. As noted earlier in the discussions of the surveys, the demographic percentages for students’ ethnicity, gender, and religious orientation remained nearly constant on both surveys, allowing for comparison between the two sets of survey results as describing essentially similar student populations. Moreover, the 256 exit survey respondents comprised fully 15 percent of the original 1,634 entering students who had been invited to respond to the initial survey in 2007, providing a reasonable pre/post sample of the students in the Class of 2011.

In order to compare student attitudes and experiences at the beginning and end of their undergraduate careers at Georgetown, the following five pairs of items comprised the repeated measures to provide a window on the development of interreligious and intercultural understanding during their undergraduate career.

### 2007 Survey Questions Repeated in 2011

The following five pairs of items comprised the repeated measures in this analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2007 Item</th>
<th>2011 Item</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>‘Prior to attending Georgetown…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>‘My religious background and experiences: I consider myself deeply religious’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 28. 2007 Survey Questions Repeated in 2011
Table 29. Initial survey Q5: Religious background and experience

Table 30. Exit survey Q7: Religious background and experiences
The first repeated item simply asked for students’ recollections of where they had interacted with religiously diverse others when they were in high school four years earlier. As people often remember details and events inaccurately after several years, it was not surprising that on average the students’ 2011 reported levels of such interactions varied by 10 to 15 percent from baseline 2007 levels on most response choices. In general, however, the relative ranking of frequency of interactions was reported similarly for both years.

The second repeated question focused on students’ religious background and experiences, including how often they discussed religion and politics with their friends and how interacting with people from other faiths affected their own religious beliefs. This comparison found that 2011 levels of reported behaviors were 15 percent to 24 percent lower for all response options when compared with 2007 combined levels of those who chose ‘Agree somewhat’ or ‘Agree strongly’. The largest decreases were recorded for three response options: ‘I discuss politics with my friends regularly’ (23.8% drop from 2007 levels); ‘My parents were deeply religious’ (20.8% lower); and ‘Interacting with people of other religions strengthens my religious beliefs’ (19.6% less). There are several possible reasons for these results. One possibility is that in 2007 some students may have over-reported their discussions of politics and/or their parents’ religious commitment. Another is that the smaller student population responding to the 2011 survey (256 students) actually discussed politics less often and had parents who were less religious, when compared with the larger group responding to the 2007 survey (460 students). For the third response option, the lower level of agreement in 2011 could indicate a slight increase in the number of students who questioned their beliefs due to interacting with people of diverse faiths. Alternatively, the lower agreement level could simply indicate that in 2011 there were fewer students responding to the survey who felt their beliefs were strengthened by interacting with diverse faiths. The overall pattern of lowered response levels may indicate that students’ religious feelings and experiences had decreased in salience during four years of college, or that these experiences were normalized by the openly religious campus climate at Georgetown.

The next comparison looked at what factors may have caused students to change their religious beliefs during college. Student response levels to three of the choices on this question differed more than 10 percentage points between the 2007 and 2011 surveys. There was a 10.6 percent increase in agreement that the ‘influence of a teacher/professor’ had influenced students’ religious beliefs, coupled with a 15.4 percent decrease in the ‘influence of an adult mentor (2007)/campus minister or chaplain’ (2011).

The largest difference, however, was an 18.8 percent drop in the influence of ‘the events of September 11th, 2001, and the threat of terrorism.’ While in this last case, the passage of time may have caused these events to recede in importance to students, it is also possible that living and studying on Georgetown’s diverse campus allowed some students to broaden their perspective on world events through daily interaction with people from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

A fourth repeated measure elicited student levels of agree-
Table 33. Initial survey Q6: ‘My religious beliefs have changed due to…’

Table 34. Exit survey Q21: ‘My religious beliefs have changed due to…’
Table 35. Initial survey Q13: Statements about religious beliefs

Table 36. Exit survey Q17: Statements about religious beliefs
ment with the importance of seven life aspirations. All response levels decreased from 2007 to 2011, around 5 percent or less on five items, but more than 10 percent for two of the response options to this question. The agreement level to ‘Open myself to diverse religious beliefs and practices’ declined 10.1 percent, while the level of students agreeing that they strive to ‘Find answers to spiritual and theological questions that may lead me beyond my own religious beliefs’ fell 16.4 percent between the two surveys.

It appears from these results that many students’ religious beliefs—or lack of them—may have solidified during their college years, leaving them less likely to want to explore other religions or look beyond their own beliefs for answers to life’s questions.

The final pre/post comparison found relatively little change in students’ overall levels of agreement to seven statements about religious beliefs. Student responses on all choices to this question did not vary by more than 5 percent when comparing the 2007 results with those of the 2011 survey. One minor difference involved a pair of responses that varied equally in opposite directions: a 5 percent increase in agreement with ‘Different religious traditions open up valuable alternative perspectives’ was offset by a 5 percent decrease in agreement with the statement that ‘Only religious belief can explain the deepest mysteries of life’ (see Tables 35 and 36).

Focusing on the views of students graduating in 2011, then, it appears that while over 85 percent of the survey respondents valued the multiple perspectives provided by diverse religions, fewer than one-third agreed that religious belief in general had more explanatory power than other epistemologies. The overall response pattern to this repeated survey item indicates that in general, the basic religious beliefs of the students we surveyed did not change substantially during their college years. The study components and activities were designed to elicit and document the conditions under which students deepened their interreligious and intercultural understanding while at Georgetown. Our overall goal was to explore levels of student engagement, both through building knowledge of other faiths and through participating in dialogue with adherents of those faiths. In addition, we wanted to assess whether gaining increased knowledge affected student attitudes, either positively or negatively, toward religions and their adherents.

We wanted to know how students encountered other faiths: Where did students get the information on which they based their views of another religion and the belief system of its adherents? Where in the curriculum, and how, were their questions about other religions addressed? We also wanted to trace changes in student attitudes: What experiences affected students, and why were they successful in increasing interreligious and intercultural understanding? Are students more likely to develop or increase in interreligious understanding when they are less certain of their own religious beliefs? Do students need to have a religious faith or belief system in order to develop interreligious understanding with others? How did students’ perspectives alter during their undergraduate experience, and what made the difference? Finally, we wanted to know what facilitated religious awareness: Did students recognize changes in their own interreligious understanding, and what did they think caused those changes? Are there other factors that could influence and increase interreligious and intercultural understanding during the college experience?

The wealth of qualitative and quantitative data collected during the four years of this study enabled us to address these questions with much more confidence than when we began the project. Taken as a whole, the comments discussed in this report represent the collective views and attitudes of over 250 students who participated in two online surveys, as well as participants in one of the nine focus groups, 40 interviews, or eight reflection papers. The following discussion summarizes the study’s findings for the major research questions listed above.

**How students encountered other faiths**

The results of the initial survey indicated that most students came to Georgetown with moderate levels of religious belief and exposure to other religious traditions. Some students, however, reported significant opposition from their parents in regard to their desire to explore other faiths while they were living at home. These students, as well as many others, found that Georgetown was a ‘safe place’ for their religious views to develop, and that the Jesuit approach to education allowed them to freely examine and challenge their beliefs. Personal interactions appeared the most significant in encouraging cultural understanding, followed by classroom experiences and the diverse campus environment. Nearly a third of study participants said that personal interactions with roommates, friends, and classmates contributed strongly to their intercultural understanding. Many students said they were exposed to other religions in the required Theology Department courses. Several non-Christian students, as well as some who had no religious beliefs, mildly criticized the required theology courses; however, none of these students said the classes had no value or that the requirement should be eliminated. In fact, several students commented that they were pleasantly surprised as the courses offered the opportunity to discuss religion in an academic environment.

Based on their responses to the initial survey, students had expected to gain knowledge of other faiths, to study the role of religion in the world and in their own lives, and to develop their personal spirituality while at Georgetown. The commitment
measures on the exit survey indicated that 75.3 percent had taken classes about ‘my own faith tradition and others,’ while another 20.3 percent reported ‘having studied other faiths only tangentially.’ Study results indicated that about two-thirds of the entering students who were surveyed felt confident in their knowledge of other religions; four years later, over 80 percent felt comfortable discussing religion in class. The study’s findings confirmed students’ growing confidence in their knowledge of other faiths and their relative comfort in discussing religion in academic and social settings.

Finally, the results of the commitment measures also revealed that the academic study of religion is a stronger indicator of student interest in learning about other faiths than attendance at religious services. In summary, while academic knowledge of diverse religions increases student confidence and willingness to discuss religion among friends; it does not appreciably raise the likelihood of student participation in religious activities. Moreover, due to student attitudes regarding the social aspect of attending services, participation in services was not a reliable indicator of students’ religious commitment.

**Changes over time in student attitudes**

A comparison of student responses on the initial and exit surveys, changes in the depth and focus of student comments during focus groups and interviews, and the reflection papers provide a complex image of religious and cultural understanding during their years at Georgetown.

Based on our preliminary analysis of the first two years of the study data, an early indicator of change was that more knowledge usually yields positive perceptions, or at least greater tolerance, of other faiths and cultures. On all study measures, students gave almost uniformly positive responses about the benefits of attending classes and studying with the diverse group of students. Many mentioned that their classroom experience was ‘more diverse’ than their campus social life. Thus the fact that they had daily academic contact with peers from other religions or cultures—even if they did not have a diverse friend group—was not related to their level of comfort with these interactions.

Beyond their academic discussions in class, students reported talking about religion with friends and roommates; both were significant in increasing interreligious understanding. Students said interactions with different perspectives helped challenge their previously held stereotypes of other religions and cultures. The overwhelming majority of students reported interacting regularly in classes, dormitories, or on campus with others who differed from them in significant ways, whether culturally, ethnically, or religiously.

Students who studied abroad experienced multiple opportunities to re-examine their own views of American social and cultural norms. Some students were able to describe the recognition of other experiences in their own ideology, such as white American students experiencing the status of ‘minority’ and ‘outsider’ in an Asian or African nation. These narratives revealed a growing cultural awareness along with a movement towards empathy with those who differed significantly from themselves.

The belief systems and background of students also influenced the extent to which their interreligious understanding increased at college. For example, students who came to campus as atheists or agnostics reported gaining a more positive perspective on religion and for people of faith. And students who were religious noted that the open atmosphere at Georgetown encouraged them to get to know students with no faith tradition, or those who questioned religious faith. These comments reveal the reciprocal nature of the interfaith dialogue that enable students to deepen religious engagement, regardless of their own belief system.

The overall pattern of student comments and survey responses indicate that religious feelings and experiences may have decreased in salience during college years; at the same time, living and studying on Georgetown’s diverse campus allowed many students to broaden perspectives through daily interaction with people from a variety of diverse, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Finally, the pre/post survey comparison found relatively little change in students’ overall levels of agreement to seven statements about religious beliefs. Thus, it appears that for many students, their religious beliefs—or lack of them—solidified during their college years, leaving them less likely to look beyond their own belief systems for answers to life’s questions. On the other hand, increased confidence in their own values and identities allowed them to interact with more respect and understanding with those from another perspective or background.

**Factors that facilitated religious awareness and understanding**

Beginning in the second year focus groups, student comments revealed reflection and self-awareness. In both attitude and behavior, students disclosed that they had found themselves thinking and acting differently in regard to students from other faiths or cultures. As noted above, most students thought their interreligious understanding had increased due to their curricular engagement of world religions and from interacting with diverse students. In addition, those who studied abroad, demonstrated a deepening awareness and more mature reflection about encounters with challenging intercultural issues, including segregation, bias and prejudice, and racism.

Finally, Georgetown’s Catholic and Jesuit heritage played an important role in facilitating cultural understanding and interreligious dialogue. While some students were critical of certain aspects of the beliefs or traditions of the Catholic Church, almost all responded positively to a Jesuit campus environment and approach to education. Jesuit values such as social justice, intellectual curiosity, *cura personalis*, and valuing cultural differences resonated with many students.
Students from non-Abrahamic religions, as well as those who were atheist or agnostic, said they could connect with these Jesuit values regardless of their faith tradition or lack of religious belief. As a final point, it should be noted that because of the open religious environment of Georgetown, students were much more willing to be candid about their religious feelings, ideas, and critiques. The generally accepted religious atmosphere on campus thus greatly facilitated this study, which would likely have been much more difficult to conduct at a secular institution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Following from the study’s main conclusions, this section offers several general approaches for facilitating student interreligious and intercultural understanding. Based on our analysis of the body of data discussed in this report, significant findings from the study and their related implications for fostering student understanding include:

- Increased knowledge of other religions or cultures, in and of itself, can increase students’ interreligious or intercultural understanding.

- Academic courses on religion, such as the university’s requirement in theology, can provide a basis for the discussion of faith and religion, and often encourage further interreligious dialogue among students beyond the classroom.

- Direct, personal experience with another faith or its adherents positively affects interreligious understanding, through friendships attendance at services, or during discussions in or out of the classroom.

- Maximizing opportunities to encourage students to interact with diverse others, such as in residence hall assignments, classroom study or research groups, and campus activities, can facilitate interreligious and intercultural understanding.

- The combination of academic study and personal experiences with those of other faiths or cultures (friendships, campus activities, study abroad, etc.) appeared to be most effective in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding.

- Students will benefit most from classes on religions and cultures when they are also able to interact with people of those faiths or backgrounds, whether through university-sponsored campus activities or discussion groups, class visits to houses of worship, study abroad experiences, or ideally their own personal friendships.

- Students who demonstrated a high degree of tolerance of alternative perspectives were able to disagree about the validity of specific religious beliefs or the value of religion itself while still agreeing strongly on a range of moral and ethical issues.

- Courses and activities that develop students’ abilities to suspend judgment, engage with a variety of perspectives, and sustain respectful dialogue despite disagreement are most likely to enhance religious and cultural understanding regardless of the individual students’ belief systems.

- As students gained a stronger sense of self and grew more comfortable with their identities they were able to communicate more effectively and generously with people who differed from themselves in significant ways.

- While encouraging interaction among students from diverse backgrounds can promote understanding, it is also crucial to provide a community of support and opportunities for individual students’ personal growth, particularly for students who are from minority groups within the campus population.

Incorporating the student perspective

Throughout this study, students made thoughtful, insightful, and candid comments about their undergraduate education and their interreligious and intercultural experiences. In addition to the above strategies for increasing student awareness and understanding of religions and cultures—many of which the university already employs—the study participants themselves made several suggestions based on their experiences at Georgetown. While it was not the purpose of this study to critique or evaluate either the university’s curriculum or student life, we do believe that much can be gained by viewing both of them from the students’ point of view.

In responding to 5 statements about Hinduism, only 22 percent to 40 percent of the students chose a categorical response (Agree/Disagree). The remaining 60 percent to 78 percent selected either ‘Am not sure,’ ‘Do not have sufficient information,’ or ‘Do not know anything about this.’ By contrast, student responses to the 5 questions about Buddhists’ beliefs and actions indicated more confidence in their knowledge of that faith and its adherents: 31 percent to 77 percent selected an ‘Agree’ or ‘Disagree’ response, with a smaller range (23% to 69%) choosing one of the 3 ambivalent responses.

The idea of Georgetown as a ‘safe space’ for religion emerged during the discussions in the previous individual interviews, and as such the researchers decided to pursue this theme in student discussions the following year.

Interviews with the seven junior-year students studying abroad during the Spring 2010 semester were conducted primarily by email. The students were asked to fill out questionnaires that addressed their overseas experiences in detail. A few of the interviews were conducted through Google video chat.

In order to control for differences in interview technique and conversational style, all 40 interviews were conducted by the same researcher, who had also conducted most of the focus groups. This consistency increased reliability as it allowed the interviewer to be mindful of the variations in non-verbal behaviors exhibited by different students, including tone of voice, rate of speech, facial expressions, and gestures.

At the time of this study, Georgetown University’s undergraduate general education requirement included 2 semester courses in Theology, regardless of a student’s major discipline or school of enrollment. The Department of Theology offered two courses as alternate choices for the first mandatory course: the “Problem of God” and “Introduction to Biblical Literature.” The remainder of the departmental course offerings served as the pool for the second course requirement. Many students opted for the Problem of God, an introductory course described by the Department as “an examination of the religious dimension of human experience and consciousness in relation to a number of problems and challenges: the problem of knowledge; the relation of faith and reason; various historical, social and existential determinants of belief; the challenge of atheism and humanism; the impact of secularization on religion.” Typically 12 to 15 different faculty members offer the course; there is variation across the readings and teaching approaches used for the course.

In order to highlight changes in student attitudes and understanding, their comments are listed chronologically by semester, e.g. Spring 2008 focus group (SP 08), Fall 2008 focus groups (FL 08), Spring 2009 interviews (SP 09).

Things have changed since this study emerged and Georgetown now has a Hindu chaplain in residence and Hindu students have a sacred space.

According to the program’s sponsoring organization, Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching & Service, “Alternative Spring Break introduces students to issues affecting underserved
communities throughout the country. The program fosters lasting service commitment at Georgetown University and builds long term relationships with our community partners. By participating in service, culture, and social justice immersion in a substance free environment, ASB promotes learning, reflection, and continued engagement. The Trips are designed to connect Georgetown students and community members together as you work towards personal growth, mutual awareness, and social justice. All interested students are welcome to apply, and the diversity of the Georgetown student body is an integral component of the ASB ideal.”

10 Student demographic descriptions use those categories students anonymously self-selected on the survey.

11 In addition to their written comments, students were asked to select one of four answers in response to whether or not Georgetown University had increased their level of intercultural understanding. Of the 253 students who answered this item, 72 percent responded ‘Yes.’ A total of 23 percent responded either ‘Slightly’ or ‘Possibly.’ Only 5 percent chose ‘Not particularly’ or ‘No.’

12 Note that percents total more than 100 percent because 39 respondents chose multiple faith categories, e.g. ‘Atheist/Jewish; ‘Agnostic/Catholic/Spiritual, not religious; ‘Other Christian/Spiritual, not religious/Presbyterian (Raised); ‘Atheist/Buddhist/Spiritual, not religious.’

13 These five repeated measures will be discussed in a following section comparing the results of the 2007 initial survey with those of the 2011 exit survey.

14 Commitment measures attempt to assess the degree to which respondents actually behaved in ways that they had indicated previously that they intended to or would like to behave.

15 Of the total number of students who had self-identified as atheist or agnostic on the survey (76), 37 percent reported having felt excluded or uncomfortable on campus due to their lack of religious belief.

16 Students who self-identified as either Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, or other Christian

17 The 26 students in this group included 16 Jewish, 4 Buddhist, 3 Hindu, and 3 Muslim students.

18 Since this report was written, there are an equal number of sacred spaces on campus across religious traditions. ‘Minority’ religious traditions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism now have the opportunity to hold as many events and religious services as the majority religious traditions on campus.

19 Cross-tabulated data is useful for showing a side by side comparison of two or more survey questions to determine how they are interrelated. In statistical terms, it is a joint distribution between one or more discrete variables containing possible values of ‘discrete’ points on a scale, such as student attitudes or behavior, and an independent or control variable such as demographics (e.g. religious orientation) that remains unchanged and is thought to strongly influence values.

20 “88 percent of the students surveyed agreed that they had ‘already studied about religions other than my own’, while 62 percent agreed that they had ‘considerable knowledge about other religions.’” (Report of the Fall 2007 Survey, p. 15).

21 For the other three response options to Q17, the ‘agree’ level of both groups was essentially the same, and was also within 5 percentage points of the overall survey ‘agree’ level. These response choices were: ‘All religions manifest some truth; ‘All life is sacred; and ‘Non-religious people can be moral.’

22 Note that percents total more than 100 percent because 39 respondents chose multiple faith categories, e.g. ‘Atheist/Jewish; ‘Agnostic/Catholic’.

23 Text in brackets indicates wording that appeared on the 2011, but not the 2007, survey.
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