

## **Applying to Teach at Religiously-Affiliated Institutions:**

### **Advice for New Psychology Faculty**

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A hundred and twenty years ago, the vast majority of postsecondary schools in the United States—about 80%—were tied to religious organizations (Noseworthy, 2003). These days the percentage is much smaller. In 2001, about 980 religiously-affiliated (RA) colleges and universities which represent 20% of the 4279 degree-granting schools in the U.S. enrolled more than 1.5 million students (Knapp, Kelly, Whitmore, Wu, & Gallego, 2003; Noseworthy, 2003). Although RA institutions may no longer dominate college teaching as they once did, they still represent a notable segment of the American educational enterprise. Many future psychology faculty will consider applying to teach at one or more RA schools. What might or should such applicants consider in doing so?

Every department filling a tenure-track position ultimately asks itself how well a candidate would fit into its overall mission and culture over the very long term. Similarly, candidates must ask themselves frankly whether for (potentially) an entire career they could entertain working within that institutional mission and a specific departmental culture.

RA schools differ considerably from other schools in their mission and cultural identity. Consider the differences across what I will broadly term religiously-*confessing*, *guided*, and *historical* institutions.<sup>1</sup> Confessing schools adhere to an explicit faith tradition that informs both academic and nonacademic activities of the institution in a more or less pervasive fashion. Religiously-guided schools identify themselves with a specific faith tradition, which in turn, affects selective aspects of the institution's work. These aspects might include core courses in religious studies, campus ministry outreach to the school as a whole or

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<sup>1</sup> I will omit discussion of religiously-*missionary* or *proselytizing* schools like Bible colleges or seminaries which primarily seek to train their students for ministry within a specific denomination.

to resident dormitories, regular spiritual retreat weekends, volunteer service programs, and observance of religious holidays. Note that religiously-guided schools are generally welcoming of students and faculty of other traditions or even no faith. Finally, schools may have a historical bond to a specific religious tradition that continues to affect campus life and practices in mostly a residual fashion. My setting, Le Moyne College, is a Carnegie Masters II, private, Catholic school with 2400 FTE undergraduates and 400 FTE graduate students. Founded by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1946, Le Moyne would likely fit under the religiously-guided label.

Applicants should identify the type of RA school to which they are applying. They should research the school's (a) overall mission statement, (b) history, and (c) any formal presentations outlining the goals and expectations for members of the college's community. School Web sites—particularly sub-pages connected to the president's office—usually provide such data. Most institutions have their latest catalog posted online and applicants should read it.

If the religious tradition of a school is foreign to an applicant, he or she ought to address that lack of knowledge or understanding directly. Minimally, a candidate should research the explicit values and historical character of the founders or continuing religious sponsors of a school. Applicants at a Catholic college in the Benedictine tradition would not strengthen their employment chances with an interview comment such as "I figure that Benedictines are just like Jesuits or Franciscans." Job candidates can usually expect to be asked explicitly by deans, chairs, or their equivalent about the institution's mission statement and how they see themselves fostering or supporting the goals expressed therein. Other interviewers may pose similar questions. A candidate ought not only to know a school's goals, but to be able to hold an informed conversation about them.

Further components of the culture of an RA school include other faculty members, the student body, behavioral and dress standards, the physical plant, and the curriculum. Applicants need to get a sense of the composition and culture of both the departmental and

school faculty. An obvious question directed by candidates to interviewers might be, "Would you tell me something about how the faith tradition of this college affects the life of its faculty members?" In many religiously-guided or historical schools, the impact might be quite indirect, but in confessing schools, the effect is usually much broader. Thus, although no explicit test of faith may be used in hiring, co-religionists may form a significant minority or even majority of adherents across the teaching staff even in religiously-guided institutions. Applicants should closely examine a school's policy on non-discrimination or affirmative action (or note the absence of such a policy). Similarly, the student body may contain a sizeable proportion of followers of the school's religious tradition, for example, at Le Moyne, about 75% of our students identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Potential faculty might be asked by interviewers how their teaching would respect the cultural roots and religious outlook of such students.

There are relatively few explicit behavioral or, even, dress standards at religiously-guided or historical schools though confessing colleges often expect their faculty to act or dress in specific ways. Le Moyne mandates no religiously-sanctioned behaviors or dress standards beyond general academic professionalism. Yet, confessing schools might forbid male beards, drinking alcohol, or cohabitation by unmarried faculty. Applicants ought to inquire discretely about such issues with their interviewers. Note, too, that the physical plant itself may reflect a school's religious tradition. For example, most classrooms at Le Moyne have a crucifix attached above the front chalk boards. Their presence is considered to be an expression of the school's mission and potential faculty might not always grasp the affective importance of such symbols. Thus, I would caution job applicants in making negative or disparaging comments about religious aspects of a school's physical plant.

Pedagogical, curricular, and research activities are central to the professional identity of teachers. In religiously-guided and historical institutions psychology faculty are usually completely free to choose what they teach and how they choose and to carry out scholarly work. However, it is noteworthy that half of the 24 censures on academic freedom issued by

the American Association of University Professors between 1990 and 2002 were to RA institutions (two Baptist, four Catholic, and one each to "Christian," Episcopalian, Methodist, Mormon, Presbyterian, and Unification Church-affiliated schools; "Censured administrations, 1930-2002," 2003). Applicants should weigh their own scholarly agenda and pedagogical expectations in light of the mission and cultural standards of an RA school, particularly confessing colleges, to which they might apply. If there is any suspicion that such a conflict might arise, it would be prudent to air these with interviewers in a measured but explicit way.

I have served on a half-dozen psychology hiring committees at Le Moyne and know generally what I hope to find in a potential colleague: enthusiasm for students and for teaching, a willingness to serve the department's needs collaboratively and with energy, the potential for reasonable scholarly productivity, and a general openness to and respect for the values of our college's mission, which is rooted in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition. I do not know in any formal sense the explicit faith commitment of many of my colleagues on the faculty. However, I do have an experience of mutual respect on matters of faith and the Catholic and Jesuit tradition at Le Moyne. I would judge that we have hired very well, indeed.

#### References

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