

# “Reconceiving the Secular Liberal Arts”

## Call for Applications

### A Teagle Workshop on New Frameworks for Big Questions on Campus

With support from the Teagle Foundation, this workshop consultation is a low-cost way to help educators and students begin a learning-centered conversation about the secular borders of campus life. Leading scholars today are revising earlier assumptions that as societies become more modern they become less religious. Yet discussion of what these revised secular ideals mean for the practice of liberal arts education has only recently begun. Like the first introductions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture as aspects of student learning, redefining secularity as a flexible ideal and diverse set of practices will help campuses better reflect their increasingly cosmopolitan character.

#### What institutions might benefit?

Private liberal arts colleges and universities, whether religiously affiliated or secularly identified, that are:

- assessing the role of religion and spirituality in the classroom and campus life
- facing new religious diversity on their campuses
- seeking more integration of academic affairs, student affairs, and religious life

#### Learning impact

This workshop is designed to help your campus:

- Find flexible approaches to engage students’ “Big Questions” of meaning, purpose, and value in ways that incorporate the particular history and identity of your institution.
- Develop a dynamic and engaging framework for exploring what current scholarly debates on secularity mean for the practice of liberal arts education.
- Adapt a tested qualitative research design on these issues to your campus.
- Cultivate trust for turning potentially polarizing issues and conflicting beliefs into constructive learning.

#### What does your institution receive?

- Facilitation and assessment by a faculty member and administrator with several years’ experience leading campus discussions on these issues.
- Targeted “listening” sessions to help your institution move from presumptions about its identity, history, and student life, toward a more objective appraisal.
- Workshop manuals with qualitative research materials, course syllabi, co-curricular programming, and brief essays to help you develop these discussions on your campus.
- Teagle support for your expenses (see “Costs” below).

#### Workshop Facilitators

This one-day workshop will be led by two members of the Secularity and the Liberal Arts Working Group, a four campus consortium of faculty, chaplains, and religious life administrators from Bucknell University, Macalester College, Vassar College, and Williams College. The Working Group completed a two year project in 2009 that included qualitative research, faculty-administrator seminars, a White Paper and Working Group Papers, and a concluding conference—“Varieties of Secular Experience”—at Vassar College attended by eighty five people from thirty one different institutions of higher education.

#### Expectations

A senior administrator at campuses selected for this consult will be expected to recruit ten to twelve faculty members, four to six student-life administrators, and six to eight students to participate in the workshops. Workshops are generally designed to begin with lunch and end after dinner for all participants.

#### Costs

The Teagle grant provides the costs of facilitator honoraria, workshop curriculum manuals, and stipends for student participants from your campus. Selected campuses are expected to provide costs for facilitators’ travel and lodging, meals for workshop participants, and other hospitality expenses. The Teagle grant provides a subsidy of \$150 – \$450 towards your hospitality costs.

## Workshop Schedule

Our workshop design includes separate workshops for faculty/administrators and for students, a concluding workshop that brings student, faculty, and administrator participants together, and opening and closing meals for all participants. While we will plan each workshop in consultation with your campus, a sample schedule would be:

12 Noon – 12:50pm	Lunch and opening discussion for faculty, student, and administrator participants in the day's workshop
1:00 – 2:30pm	Workshop I with students
3:00 – 4:30pm	Workshop II with faculty and administrators
5:00 – 6:30pm	Workshop III with students, faculty, and administrators
6:30 – 7:30pm	Closing Dinner

## Applications

To apply, submit a brief statement (500 words) by describing what makes this discussion of secularity, questions of meaning and purpose, and liberal arts education relevant to your campus, along with a letter acknowledging your institution's acceptance of the expectations and costs outlined above. We will schedule accepted applications for campus visits during the spring and fall, 2010.

Send your materials by December 21, 2009 to "Reconceiving the Secular Liberal Arts," Box 488, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY 12604. With questions or for more information, see <http://projects.vassar.edu/secularity/> or email [secularity@vassar.edu](mailto:secularity@vassar.edu).



## Sample Quotations from our Research

In the Teagle Working Group's qualitative research, we learned about where students engage their "big questions," how they experience campus secularity as something both invisible and powerful, and the many different ways people define "secular."

### Students told us:

"A text only affects a person if they are open to it. The teacher has no power to give or shield from crises of faith."

"I don't think that the conversation of 'big questions,' or what is life about, that kind of thing, can happen if religion can't be in the conversation."

"The classroom space is not a religious space, and I actually feel like there's more anti-religious and assumingly atheist comments in the classroom than anywhere else in my life."

"'Is a secular campus a good thing?' – I don't think that right now you could phrase it as a good or a bad thing. Right now it's a necessary thing. Our society and a culture, both on our campus and on a more global scale, [aren't] equipped with the skills to have a pluralistic, multi-faith dialogue."