



RICE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP)

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 2021 - JUNE 2022



USING RESEARCH ON RELIGION TO BUILD COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



I am excited and honored to share some important news: Beginning July 1, [I will be the next director of the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance at Rice University](#). Once I take on this new leadership role, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) will come under the Boniuk Institute, carrying on its work of conducting top-notch research on religion, training the next generation of thought leaders, and translating research for relevant communities.

Since founding the RPLP in 2010, we have worked with over 100 faculty, staff, postdocs, grad students, and undergrads. We have also raised \$12 million in grant funding to spearhead nearly 20 research studies; over 250 events and convenings; more than 150 research articles, books, and other publications;

and nearly 5,000 national and international media appearances. It has been my privilege to partner with such an amazing and talented team. This is a true community of scholars and staff coming together to produce consequential research on religion and its relationship to race, science, immigration, and much more. (I want to draw particular attention to the work of senior staff Laura Achenbaum, associate director of research, and Hayley Hemstreet, program manager.)

I am equally excited to announce that [my successor as director of the Religion and Public Life Program will be Dr. Rachel Schneider](#). As a postdoctoral research fellow of the RPLP for the past three years, Rachel has proved herself to be a true leader in carrying out the RPLP's vision to conduct research on religion that has public relevance. Rachel will bring her interdisciplinary approach and perspective to the position, having studied and worked across the fields of religion, sociology, and anthropology.

I am sure you have already noticed Rachel's involvement and leadership in various RPLP research and programming initiatives. For some examples, you can look to her research articles on [race and religion](#) and [religion in the workplace](#); her leadership of events like one on [race, religion, and politics](#); and her work on the [Religion Unmuted](#) podcast, for which she led the writing and production efforts.

I am excited to see what the next stages of the RPLP under different leadership will entail, and I hope you will continue to be involved in the program's efforts to advance its mission: to use research on religion to build common ground for the common good.

On behalf of the RPLP, thank you for your support. I am deeply grateful to each of you for being a part of our work. It has been my true privilege to build and serve the RPLP these past 12 years.

Our research is funded by grants and all our programming is funded through private donations. To learn more about how you can support our work, please see the last page of this report, contact rplp@rice.edu or visit our website at rplp.rice.edu.

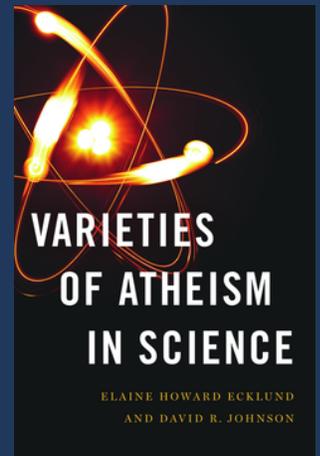
ELAINE HOWARD ECKLUND

*Founding Director, Religion and Public Life Program,
and Professor of Sociology, Rice University*

CONDUCTING TOP-NOTCH RESEARCH

The Religion and Public Life Program strives to conduct research that is relevant and addresses the most critical issues of our time. It has been another productive year with respect to our research initiatives.

First, we celebrate the release of a second book from our years studying scientists and their views on religion. RPLP Director Elaine Howard Ecklund and former RPLP postdoctoral fellow David R. Johnson published [*Varieties of Atheism in Science*](#) (Oxford University Press) in August 2021. This book relates to an ongoing project titled "[Communicating Outlooks for a New Global Religion and Science Synergy: The Engagement Challenge](#)," for which we held outreach and engagement events in India, Hong Kong, the U.K. and Mexico in 2021 and early 2022.



Additionally, we are deep into book writing efforts for a project called "[Faith at Work: An Empirical Study](#)," which examines the intersections of people's religious and professional lives. Our team is preparing both an academic book and a book for general audiences from the extensive focus group, survey and interview data collected over the past four years.



We are also preparing to begin book writing using survey and interview data collected for two affiliated studies focused on the role of religion in experiences of discrimination and violence across the U.S. – the "[Religion-Related Bias Victimization: Addressing a Blind Spot](#)" study (funded by the National Science Foundation) and the "Giving a Voice to Victims of Religious Bias and Hate Crimes in Houston and Beyond" study (funded by Rice University). Alongside these books, we have published numerous articles and frequently given invited presentations, with many more in the pipeline. You can learn more about our recent projects in the [Research section of our website](#).

RESEARCH BY THE NUMBERS

12

academic
publications

26

invited
lectures and
presentations

1,448

people
reached through
presentations

CONDUCTING TOP-NOTCH RESEARCH

After several years of working on a study, it is always a joy to see the fruits of our labor realized in tangible forms (such as presentations and publications), but we also really enjoy the burst of data collection activities that are characteristic of research projects in their earlier phases. We have several newer studies underway. Here, we highlight just a few.



For our project looking at [how people from different racial and gender groups understand the boundaries between religion and science in relation to the human body](#), we have completed a new survey of 3,467 people and are in the process of interviewing approximately 50 survey takers on how their religiosity shapes topics like mental health and attitudes toward death and dying.

For our study of the [impact of COVID-19 and racism on issues related to faith and work](#), we have conducted a new survey of 2,486 people and are nearly complete with another 60 interviews.



Additionally, for a study in which we are [exploring the ways religious organizations around Houston are responding to COVID-19](#), data collection (survey and interviews) are complete and one of our graduate student fellows, Brenton Kalinowski, used the project data for his master's thesis in the Department of Sociology (which he successfully defended in December 2021). Like Brenton, all of our undergraduate and graduate student fellows gain extensive training in how to collect and analyze data for a wide variety of research projects related to religion.



Finally, for our [“Turning the Tables on Gender and Religion”](#) project, which seeks to highlight women's voices in conversations about religion and gender, Elaine Howard Ecklund and Rachel Schneider (a previous RPLP postdoctoral fellow and the program's incoming director) taught a related course for Rice University undergraduates called “Religion, Gender, and Inequality” in spring 2022. Additionally, our team secured a small grant from the American Academy of Religion's Luce-AAR Advancing Public Scholarship Grant Program, which will allow us to generate more episodes for the podcast associated with this project, [Religion Unmuted](#), in 2022 and 2023.



TRANSLATING RESEARCH FOR RELEVANT COMMUNITIES

At the RPLP, we believe we must extend the impact of our work beyond Rice University by making research accessible to the communities it impacts. One of the primary ways we achieve this goal is through our programming. Despite the need for flexibility to accommodate changing public health guidelines (or the Houston weather) this past year, the RPLP maintained a robust programming calendar that included online and in-person events.

Our [Religious and Civic Leader Gatherings](#) provide a venue to bring together faith and community leaders in an intimate setting to talk about timely issues, engage with our research, and share resources. In August 2021, for example, we hosted Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher at the Pew Research Center (and previous *Religion Unmuted* podcast guest), to speak virtually to attendees about Pew’s most recent survey findings on “Faith among Black Americans.” A few months later, our first in-person Religious and Civic Leader Gathering in almost two years addressed “Faith-Based Nonprofits and Poverty Alleviation in Houston” with guest Paula Pipes, a Houston-based consultant and researcher.



We were also pleased to host events for our alumni. In the fall semester we hosted an online gathering to coincide with Rice’s Homecoming week, and in the spring we held a campus gathering that welcomed alumni who were in town for Rice’s inaugural Young Alumni Weekend. We plan to continue this hybrid lineup in the future to continue to foster our extended RPLP community.

ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

816

people reached
through
programming

13

conferences,
panels and
gatherings

377

mentions in
national and
international
media

TRANSLATING RESEARCH FOR RELEVANT COMMUNITIES

The RPLP also maintains a strong public profile through local, national, and international media outlets. This past year, we grew our media presence, engagement, and outreach with mentions in newspaper, magazine, and online articles; radio and podcast interviews with team members; and highlights in Rice University news outlets.

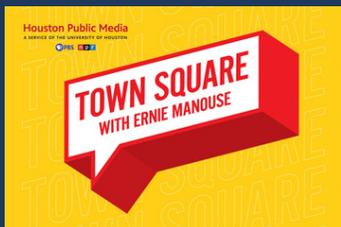


For example, research on the [“Patterns of Perceived Hostility and Identity Concealment Among Self-Identified Atheists”](#) from the [“Religion-Related Bias Victimization: Addressing a Blind Spot”](#) study was featured in an article in [Religion News Service](#) as well as an interview on [Houston Public Media’s Houston Matters show](#).

THE HILL



Research on [“How Religious Discrimination Is Perceived in the Workplace: Expanding the View”](#) from the [“Faith at Work”](#) study resulted in nearly 40 other media mentions, including coverage in *The Hill* and *Interfaith Youth Core*.



Additionally, our study [“Where Would You Go? Race, Religion, and the Limits of Pastor Mental Health Care in Black and Latino Congregations”](#) from the larger [“Religion, Inequality, and Science Education”](#) study was featured in [The Associated Press](#) and [Houston Public Media’s Town Square show](#) as well as in 15 other media outlets.



In a day when so many people seem to see religion as disconnected from public life or in only complicit or even adversarial roles, the RPLP uses sound research methodology to study timely social issues that yield enlightening and useful insights. That level of quality helps to shape accurate perceptions, informs wise decision making, and empowers community action. In my experience, the RPLP exemplifies the synergy of scholarship and social concern at its best.



James Furr
Professor of Church and Culture, Houston
Graduate School of Theology

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS



An essential component of our program is developing well-equipped and passionate leaders who will fuel data-driven social change in their communities. We achieve this by training our fellows to conduct the highest quality research and then translate that research for relevant communities. As part of that work, we host weekly Fellows Meetings for RPLP undergraduate, graduate, postdoctoral, and non-

-resident research fellows to provide updates on ongoing projects or papers, lead trainings for their colleagues, and learn from our invited guests about other relevant research on religion. For example, in December 2021, postdoctoral research fellow Oneya Okuwobi shared how diversity initiatives in religious organizations affect racial inequality in a presentation titled, “The Costs of Diversity: How Pastors, Professors, and Professionals Experience Diversity Ideology in the Workplace.”



SCHOLARS BY THE NUMBERS

24

scholars trained
and mentored

16

fellows
meetings

“

When I examine my time at Rice, one of the most academically and professionally transformative experiences was working as a fellow... The program developed my communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork capabilities which have been invaluable in my post-grad years.”

”



Timothy Chang, High School Teacher and former RPLP undergraduate student fellow, 2013-2016

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Over the past year, our team of [28 scholars and staff](#) accomplished a great deal.



Dan Bolger, an RPLP graduate student fellow, successfully defended his dissertation, “Spatial and Cultural Dimensions of Social Service Access in Majority Black Neighborhoods.”



Three of our other graduate student fellows successfully defended their master’s theses: Bianca Mabute-Louie (“How Chinese American Christians Use Religion to Frame Racial Injustice: From #BlackLivesMatter to #StopAsianHate”), Jauhara Ferguson (“How American Am I?: Comparing American Identity among US Black Muslims,”) and Brenton Kalinowski (“Religious Leaders in Houston Navigate COVID-19: A Case of Exogenous Shock and Institutional Isomorphism”).



Two of our postdoctoral fellows accepted positions as assistant professors of sociology. Oneya Okuwobi will join the University of Cincinnati and Jacqui Frost will join Purdue University. Our other postdoctoral fellow, Rachel Schneider, accepted the position as director of the Religion and Public Life Program (following Elaine Howard Ecklund’s acceptance of the directorship of the Boniuk Institute at Rice University).



Two of our undergraduate fellows, Alex Nuyda and Shifa Rahman, graduated from Rice University. Alex received the “distinction in research” designation from the Department of Sociology based on her senior honors thesis as well as other research work, and Shifa will be pursuing their Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary. Lindsey Schirn, another of our undergraduate fellows, has been accepted into the 2022 American Sociological Association Honors Program.



We celebrate all these achievements and accolades – the impact of our work is deepened by the dedication and innovative spirit of our team.

HELP US BUILD COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Our strategy is to leverage our location at a premier research university to conduct top-notch research, then translate that research to relevant communities, all while training the next generation of thought leaders to do the same. Although we have been highly successful in getting grants for research projects, these grants only support research, staff, and programming around designated topics. The Religion and Public Life Program needs to raise \$600,000 per year in current-use funding to achieve our core goals.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Through our research, and the way we translate our research into societal benefits, the RPLP is making a real difference. We hope you will join us in building common ground for the common good. ***Please consider supporting:***

Our research that aims to respond quickly, effectively, and impartially to current events happening in our city, nation, and world.

Our community partnerships and outreach, so that we can bring our research to the people who need it most.

Our efforts to bring new intellectual energy to Rice University and to Houston that will expand our teaching and research initiatives.

SUPPORT THE RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE PROGRAM

To Give Online:

Visit riceconnect.rice.edu/donation/support-religion-and-public-life. When making a gift, choose the "Religion and Public Life Program" designation from the drop-down menu.

To Donate by Check:

You can make the check payable to Rice University and include "Religion and Public Life Program" in the memo line. Please mail the check to Program Manager Hayley Hemstreet at the address below.

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