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### The Campus Believer: An Online Magazine Looking at Spiritual Life on Campus

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The Campus Believer: An Online Magazine Looking at Spiritual and Religious Life on Campus

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
Spring 2017

Honors Capstone Project in Your Major

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The Campus Believer* is a digital publication that covers the diverse spiritual life and religious culture on campus. Produced by and for college students, the publication goes beyond news events to examine how religion informs academics and pop culture, to provide guides and service journalism to help readers access and understand the interfaith activities on their campuses, and to introduce key players and intriguing personalities who comprise the spiritual communities on campus. This specific collection of stories, or “chapter” of the site, focuses on the religious and spiritual life on and around Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, which is home to more than 20 religious student organizations and 10 chaplaincies.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite having nearly 20 different student magazines on campus, there is little to no coverage of religious and spiritual life from student journalists at Syracuse University. Hendricks Chapel, the school's center of spiritual life, houses two dozen religious student groups and 10 chaplaincies; yet, these groups are rarely written about by student media, outside of occasional news pieces. This project, *The Campus Believer*, intends to fill that gap in coverage and talk about religious life through the lenses of academics, culture, and personal life. A collection of feature articles, *The Campus Believer* is published as a digital (online) magazine of the same name. I utilized the reporting and writing skills I've gained as an undergraduate — both in the classroom and through internships — to put together these 15 pieces. The site features four verticals, or categories, of coverage: "REL 101" (academics), "Need to Know" (the basics), "IRL" (individual experience) and "-Ist" (culture).

The most important component to this project was determining the purpose of this publication, and therefore its audience. It may seem strange to write about religion for college students when, according to self-reported data from the Fall 2017 semester, more than 50 percent of undergraduate and graduate students at Syracuse University selected "None" or declined to answer when asked to choose a religious affiliation. Also, the Pew Research Center's "Religious Landscape Study" reports that only 28 percent of young millennials attend weekly religious services. However, in a study conducted by Hendricks Chapel in 2016, 83.5 percent of students consider themselves to be at least "slightly spiritual." Looking at this data, it is clear that students possess interest in some type of spirituality, but just not within the confines of a set religious tradition. In fact,

instead of staying in the confines of one faith, millennials seem more interested in a diverse range of ideas and practices. Brian Konkol, the dean of Hendricks Chapel, refers to this as “hyphenated realities.” He believes that “In the current religious and spiritual context, it's not just ‘I'm changing from one thing to another based upon, you know, my own religious and spiritual evolution...’ It's far more common nowadays for students to be Jewish-Buddhist-Christian-Muslims on Tuesdays, right?” For this reason, it was vital to cover a wide range of religious and spiritual traditions all in one place. It is exactly this cross-denominational, multi-cultural interest that led me to believe college students would find value in learning about the many ways faith traditions exist on our campus and in our culture.

Although there are not set plans to continue the site after this initial collection of stories, I utilized my social media and editing experience to discuss the hypothetical future of *The Campus Believer* were it to have a full editorial staff. This includes a social media plan for the site, which would predominantly rely on Instagram and Facebook to reach its target audience of college students interested in learning about new faiths.

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## **Acknowledgements**

A sincere thanks to Melissa Chessher, Adam Peruda, the chaplains and staff of Hendricks Chapel, Lauren Markoe, Lisa Murray, and Linda Buckley.

## **CRITICAL STATEMENT**

### **Choosing My Topic**

When deciding what to focus on for my magazine-based honors capstone, the general topic wasn't hard to pin down. By my junior year, I realized that religion, specifically interfaith activity and dialogue, had become my favorite subject on which to report and write. By that time, I had branched out beyond my United Methodist upbringing, becoming active in the Spiritual Life Council (an organization composed of one student representative from each spiritual group on campus), and had an office job at Hendricks Chapel. In addition to weekly Methodist worship, I found myself attending celebrations and services for a wide variety of religious traditions – from Passover dinner in the Carrier Dome to a pagan full moon ritual. I'd begun mixing this personal interest with my career aspirations too, taking on the religion beat for my news reporting class, writing two religion-focused pieces in my magazine writing class, and ultimately interning at the Religion News Service in the summer between my junior and senior years.

The more difficult portion of the project, however, was figuring out exactly what I wanted to say about religion. Who would be my audience? What format would the publication take? What would I report on? Figuring out the answer to each of these questions was much more challenging than I could have imagined and, ultimately, finding the answers became as important a part of the capstone as actually building the project. Ultimately, a combination of coursework, internship experiences, and my time as a Remembrance Scholar helped me answer these questions and aided in the launch



of *The Campus Believer*, a publication by and for college students interested in diverse religious and spiritual life.

### **Narrowing My Focus**

I began the capstone processes in the one-credit planning seminar offered to honors juniors. At that point, having settled on a general religion focus, I narrowed in on interfaith work exclusively. Without giving as much thought as I should have to an exact audience or plan for editorial content, I decided I would talk about what college campuses across the nation were doing to promote interfaith work. While this was, and continues to be, the aspect of religion I am personally most interested in, I ultimately moved away from this approach. I did so (with the guidance of my capstone adviser) for a few reasons. I realized that trying to cover such a broad subject with a national scope from my home-base of Syracuse, New York, would be challenging. I realized that, while I couldn't know exactly what was happening in religious life on campuses across the country, I did know very well what was happening here. I possessed a wealth of sources and resources within the religious community at SU, which has an 88-year history of diverse spiritual life, and I knew that most aspects of that spiritual life weren't being covered by student journalists.

So, I shifted the focus of this project to campus life and culture on and around the Syracuse University campus, specifically in the areas of culture, personal faith and academics. I broadened the content opportunities by moving away from interfaith-specific stories but simultaneously narrowed the geographic scope of the site. I was

able to maintain the spirit of interfaith by intentionally covering diverse faith traditions, but I could tailor my audience much more easily.

When further developing the audience, I decided to use the model pioneered by *FreshU*, a publication by and for college freshmen that also started at SU. It offers general content that would be of interest to all college freshmen, but then features individual chapters on campuses, which create content specifically geared toward students at that school. My capstone site is imagined to function in a similar way, as if it were the Syracuse University “chapter” of *The Campus Believer* – some content is generic and intended for all college-aged students. Other content, however, is specific to Syracuse University.

### **Religion on Our Campus (Background)**

Although it was originally founded as a United Methodist college, Syracuse University is home to Hendricks Chapel, a center for spiritual life that opened in 1930. In a move unique for its time, the chapel was intentionally built without Christian iconography – no stained-glass windows or portraits of Christ decorated the building, then or now. It was intended to be a “place for all faiths, a home for all people.” Today, the university is almost entirely removed from its United Methodist beginnings, identifying as a “secular” university. Now there are 10 different chaplaincies based out of Hendricks Chapel: Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Pagan, Historically Black Church, and Evangelical. This type of diversity is unique. In fact, our Pagan chaplain is currently the only one in the country. In addition to these chaplaincies, Hendricks supports 24 different religious student groups. The influence of religion on this campus doesn’t stop in the main chapel building, however. The city of

Syracuse contains diverse, thriving religious communities that connect with SU students too – each of the 10 chaplaincies is directly tied to a local congregation or organization. Academically, SU offers both undergraduate and graduate religion programs.

### **Student Media on Campus (Background)**

Syracuse University provides a wide variety of opportunities for students to gain media and journalism experience on campus. There are multiple student radio stations, the Citrus TV network, and more than a dozen campus magazines. These are in addition to the *Daily Orange*, an award-winning independent student newspaper. I have written for both the *Daily Orange* and a few campus magazines. I also edited one magazine, *360*, for two years. These magazines are all incredibly focused, covering specific topics such as women’s health, fashion, hip hop music, and food. But, aside from occasional news stories in the *Daily Orange*, there was little to no religion coverage being published. I looked online for any publications like the one I envisioned that may circulate on other campuses, but found nothing quite right. Some Christian schools produce devotional materials or opportunities for students to write about being a Christian in college, but nothing discussing multiple faith traditions. I saw an opening to talk about the active, diverse religious life on campus in a way that would allow the average student to learn about it as a whole and would also allow students already involved in spiritual life to branch out beyond his or her specific tradition.

### **Why Students Will Care**

According to self-reported data from the Fall 2017 semester, just over 50 percent of undergraduate and graduate students at Syracuse University selected “None” or declined to answer when asked to choose a religious affiliation. Also, the Pew Research

Center's "Religious Landscape Study" reports that only 28 percent of young millennials attend weekly religious services. Yet in a study conducted by Hendricks Chapel in 2016, 83.5 percent of students consider themselves to be at least "slightly spiritual." Looking at this data, it seems clear to me that a publication about one specific faith would find no real audience. Instead of staying in the confines of one religious tradition, millennials seem more interested in a diverse range of ideas and practices. Brian Konkol, the dean of Hendricks Chapel, refers to this as "hyphenated realities." In an interview I conducted for my capstone, he explained how "In the current religious and spiritual context, it's not just 'I'm changing from one thing to another based upon, you know, my own religious and spiritual evolution...' It's far more common nowadays for students to be Jewish-Buddhist-Christian-Muslims on Tuesdays, right?" It is exactly this cross-denominational, multi-cultural interest that brought me to this topic in general and lead me to believe that college students would find value in learning about the many ways faith traditions exist on our campus and in our culture.

### **Developing Audience and Voice**

The exact audience for my collection of religion stories was difficult to pin down. Although I believed, as mentioned above, that millennials would be receptive to a multi-faith approach, I had to accept the reality that not everyone is as interested in spiritual life as I am. Not everyone is "in the trenches" quite the way I am either. Ultimately, I decided to gear my site toward students who are active in spiritual life but are interested in learning more about other religions on campus. This decision was important in determining my editorial lineup (the stories I would write for the site). I leaned heavily on

“explainers,” pieces that give background on religious life at SU, and stories that look at mainstream culture and student life through the lens of religion.

When creating a publication, it is also important to develop a “voice.” This refers to a specific tone the writer(s) use to address the reader. For *The Campus Believer*, I expect the audience to be well-educated but young. This means I wanted a casual voice with a touch of humor. I maintained this throughout the capstone, especially in the name of the site itself, *The Campus Believer*, and the verticals (sections of the site). These names, “REL 101” (academics), “Need to Know” (the basics), “IRL” (individual experience) and “-Ist” (faith and culture) had to convey a balance between the serious nature of the subject matter and appealing to the young adult audience.

### **Developing Platform Structure**

Deciding on a final platform and structure for this project was another challenge. While I personally enjoy print and thought a collection of religion pieces would work very well as a print publication, I knew an digital publication would be the best option for a few reasons. First, there is an over-saturation of print publications on our campus – another printed magazine would likely go unnoticed. Printing would also be far more expensive, with a much lower reach. 100 print copies would put a limit on the number of students seeing the content, but an online publication’s reach is limitless. Lastly, online publications allow for better interaction with social media and therefore with the publication’s readership.

### **Naming – Site and Verticals**

There were many factors to consider in choosing the name for this site. Because I wanted to be inclusive, I needed to avoid anything with overtly Christian connotations

(which ruled out a lot of good puns), didn't want to use the word "religion" since Buddhists and Pagans don't fully consider their practices to be "religions," and I wanted to incorporate the student/campus aspect in the name. I spent many brainstorming sessions with my capstone adviser, searching on Dictionary.com for idioms and listing words related to my capstone, hoping inspiration would strike. I ultimately decided on *The Campus Believer*. I added to the interfaith implications of this title through the design of a logo for the site. I incorporated a variety of spiritual and religious symbols into the word, providing a visual representation of the site's intended focus. Naming the verticals, or sections, of the site was equally challenging, but I chose them using similar strategies.

### **Relevant Experience: Internships**

I had two internships in particular that prepared me for and influenced my capstone project. The first was an online editorial internship at *New York Magazine*. I worked there from January to May 2017 and, although I didn't specifically write about religion, I learned a lot that applied to my work on this project. First off, I learned about the process of generating story ideas, writing, and reporting for online publication – ultimately, this experience convinced me to settle on an online publication as opposed to print. I earned much experience writing headlines, and I learned about the importance of considering SEO (search engine optimization) when building a story. I also became familiar with the idea of different "verticals," meaning different subsections covering more niche topics within a site. I ultimately decided to adopt this for my site as well, as a way to focus my work.

My second relevant internship was at the *Religion News Service*, from June to August 2017. I was able to further hone my pitching, reporting and writing skills, but this time my content was all focused specifically on religion. I was able to learn about and meet important players in various religious communities, and I worked alongside experienced religion reporters, which allowed me to learn the nuances and specific practices of this niche category of journalism. I also put my pieces on the RNS site myself, which gave me extensive experience with WordPress that I translated into creating my capstone site. I also completed a few pieces that quite literally became part of my capstone project. My boss for the internship allowed me to republish some of my RNS work that would appeal to a college audience.

### **Relevant Experience: Undergraduate Education**

A wide variety of my experiences studying at Syracuse University has given me skills and knowledge I needed to be able to produce this capstone. First, my reporting and writing classes in the SI Newhouse School of Communications (both news and magazine) helped me hone my ability to find and tell a story. Later, my magazine editing class taught me about finding “voice” and other important elements of successful magazine content. Other Newhouse classes helped me develop design, photo, social media and video skills. Meanwhile, running *360* gave me hands-on practice editing and writing.

I was also able to take a few courses in the religion department, which allowed me to explore spirituality through an academic lens for the first time. The courses I took were “Religion and Sports” and “Religion in a Globalizing World.” I had to get special permission to take the latter as a senior because it is a 100-level class and intended for

first and second-year students. However, it was certainly one of the most beneficial resources I had in preparing for my capstone. Instead of looking at one aspect of religion in depth, as an upper-level religion course would have, I was exposed to a more general overview of different faiths. I had to consider the definition of “religion” and write critically about the subject, not just as a reporter. The class also provided me with a few of my story ideas, including my piece on the lack of a Hindu presence at Hendricks chapel.

My hands-on experience running successful social media accounts also came from my time at SU. For my second major, policy studies, I worked at a local nonprofit called the Early Childhood Alliance. I created an Instagram account for the organization and maintained it throughout my internship. As a 2017-18 Remembrance Scholar, I managed all Remembrance social media accounts – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Leading up to and throughout Remembrance Week especially, I often posted on all three platforms at least once per day. I taught myself how to schedule posts, how to read analytics and how to use hashtags to boost engagement. Not only did this bring attention to the work of the Remembrance Scholars, but it was also directly applicable when creating plans for *Campus Believer* social media accounts.

### **Creating My Content**

To create content for the site, I drew on a variety of resources and sources from SU and Hendricks Chapel. I started by brainstorming a list of story ideas and identifying common topics and categories in the list. Ultimately, I came up with four categories – academics, personal experiences, the basics, and religion & culture. The next step was one of the most important: narrowing down the list to stories I would actually write. I had



to be honest with myself and realize some pieces I came up with honestly didn't match with the target audience I set for the project. For example, I have spent time working with the women in the Dean's office at Hendricks, who play a key role running the chapel. I thought about writing a "day in the life" piece describing the work they do. But when my advisor urged me to remember my audience, I had to admit that the average student wouldn't particularly care about that piece or some of my other more niche ideas. Finally, it also came down to the practical matter of finishing the work in time. In an ideal world, if this site could be fully staffed and maintained, I would be able to produce many more stories for the publication. But as a one-woman staff, I had to find a balance between the ideal and the doable. With that balancing act in mind, I made sure to have a variety of story types in my editorial lineup, including lists, longer features, Q&As and photo series.

The three pieces I brought over from the *Religion News Service* were the list of religious Etsy shops, a story about last year's *The Little Hours*, a controversial film based on *The Decameron*, and a listicle about conservative bathing suit options. All three of these clips came from ideas that I found and "pitched" to my editors as an intern. Two more pieces came from work I did in a magazine writing course: the profile of pagan chaplain Mary Hudson and the first-person account of the time I read one book of the bible each day for a week. The remaining stories in this collection were created specifically for this project, keeping in mind that the format would be digital. Because online pieces tend to be shorter and more digestible, I decided to use Q&A formats for some pieces — one about a very successful celebrity guest speaker event put on by a religious student group and another about Biko Mandela Gray, an interesting religion

professor at the school. I also wrote two additional “listicles,” pieces comprised of an introduction followed by paragraphs with accompanying images. These new listicles covered interesting religion classes on campuses across the country and different apps that religious students can utilize. I did, however, include some more traditionally written pieces for stories that I believed would benefit from relying on description and source interviews. These explored more complicated topics, including the history (and more recent controversial covering) of a mural in Hendricks Chapel and the lack of programming for Hindu students at Hendricks. I worked on a few visual stories as well, which are an important component for an online publication. After receiving the self-reported religious breakdown of students from a source, I used the data to create a series of infographics that in turn became their own story. I also used a creative layout to present the similarities and differences of the two Jewish student groups on campus. Lastly, I worked on two different photo series, which I intended to be easy-to-read, shareable content. One looks at the different Hendricks chaplains working with students, the other captures what different religion majors look like. These two pieces ultimately became the most challenging for me to complete for a few reasons — many of the chaplain’s events conflicted with my own religious practices, I could not photograph some of the more private worship activities, and there was a very low response rate from the fourteen religion majors on campus. However, I plan to keep working on and adding to these pieces until I leave campus.

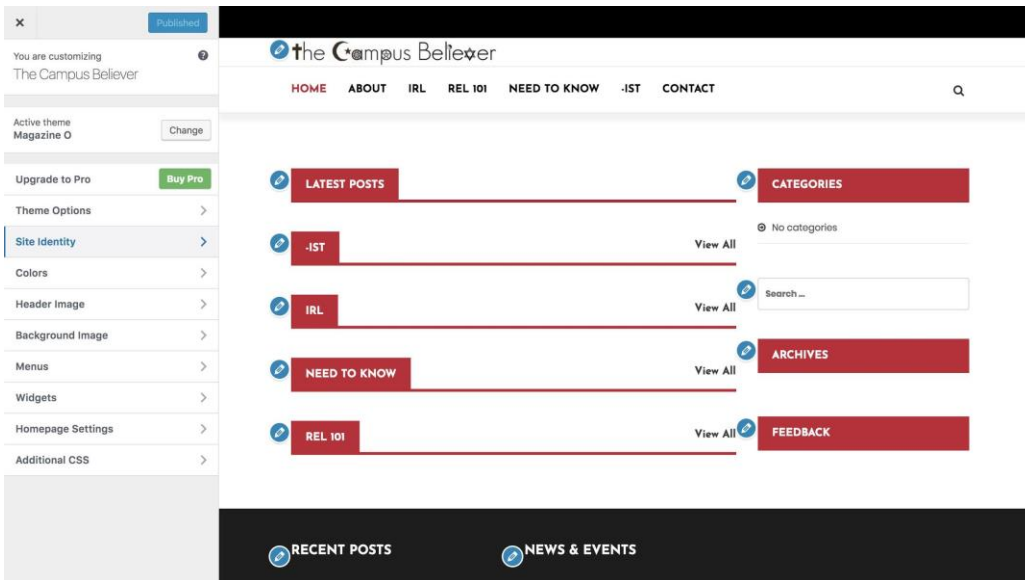
Each piece I wrote for the site required background research. This almost always involved internet searches, but often also included interviewing sources. After researching and writing each piece, I went through an editing process with my capstone

advisor, similar to the process used at most publications. After altering the piece with her edits, the pieces were ready to publish online.

### **Building the Site**

I decided to use Wordpress to create my capstone site because it is the web platform I had the most experience using. I allocated part of the funding given to me by the Renée Crown University Honors Program to purchase a more intricate, professional WordPress “theme.” I spent time looking through the dozens of layouts designed for news magazine sites and ultimately decided on and purchased a theme called The Daily Observer. I specifically liked this theme because it relies heavily on white space, which is a personal design preference. The layout also didn’t rely as heavily on visuals as many of the other news themes did. This was important because visuals serve as my weakest skill set in this project.

However, due to some technical difficulties, I ended up putting content on the site much later than I'd anticipated and almost all at once. I worked with my capstone reader to install the theme and set up my site. He has expertise in web design that neither I nor



my capstone adviser possess. He helped me troubleshoot and answered technical questions, and we came across a major issue when the “dummy” data wouldn't load for my

theme. I ended up downloading a free theme, installing its dummy data and building the site around that, then installed the Daily Observer theme at a later time.

I didn't want to make the site fully live and promote it until I had put up a decent amount of content. I originally hoped enough would be ready by March 1, but I ultimately pushed the launch to April, when I had nearly all of my stories completed.

## **Challenges**

One of the major challenges I faced when completing this project was over-committing and time management. Although both experiences gave me skills that I ultimately applied to my project, my semester living and working in New York City (Spring 2017) and my work as a Remembrance Scholar (primarily Fall 2017) became

priorities and got in the way of completing my capstone as quickly and, in some ways, as thoroughly as I would have liked. As previously mentioned, I would have preferred to have had the site go live early in the spring semester and to cultivate a legitimate social media presence.

I also faced some journalism-related challenges as I reported and wrote the pieces, which allowed me to evaluate my role and responsibilities as a journalist. One of these was balancing interests. As previously stated, I have been very involved in Hendricks Chapel and the religious community at SU since my freshman year. It was very important that I selected stories and sources I wasn't too "close" to. In the world of journalism ethics, this means I had to ensure I didn't end up in a situation where my personal relationship with someone I was writing about compromised my ability to write in a factual, "objective" manner. I took a few general steps to avoid this. Specifically, I decided not to write about the school's history with the United Methodist Church because I was personally impacted by changes made in that relationship over my four years here. At the end of my sophomore year, the local United Methodist conference cut funding for the Methodist chaplaincy at SU. This move was newsworthy and continues to be impactful, but it also resulted in me taking on the entire Methodist student group myself. It was a challenging and emotional time for me, which is why I opted not to discuss it in my project. Additionally, whenever possible, I intentionally interviewed sources I didn't know.

In addition, one specific situation did arise that spurred some ethical challenges. When researching my piece on the mural in the Dean's Suite of Hendricks, things became a bit difficult. The newest Dean of Hendricks, Brian Konkol, decided to cover a

mural in his office with a curtain this fall. When I interviewed the Dean about this change, I was under the impression that the mural's artist, Harry Freeman-Jones, was aware of the change. When I reached out to Harry, who I had met before at church services at SU, he contacted the chapel, concerned to hear that the mural had been covered. This put me in an unusual and uncomfortable position. I had to weigh whether the story was important enough to justify these uncomfortable conversations, and I had to enter my interview with Harry and write the piece much more cautiously than I'd expected.

### **Hypotheticals: Future of Publication**

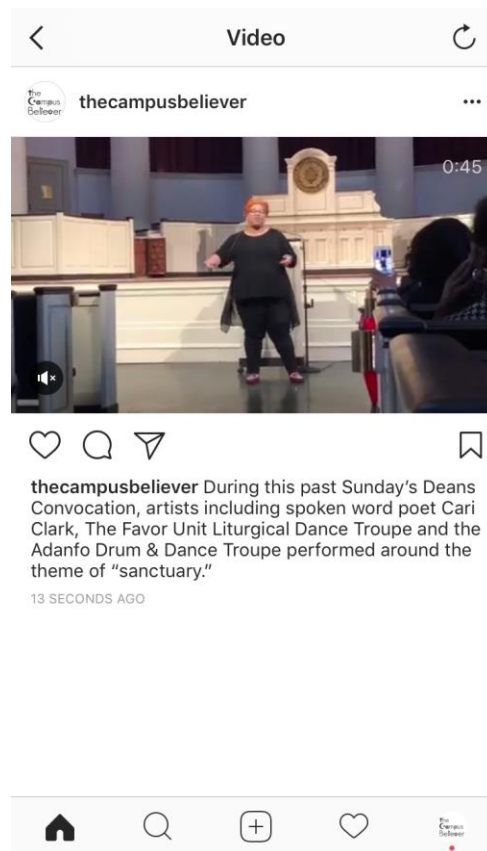
In an ideal world, this publication would continue to grow be maintained after I leave campus. However, I did not structure the project in a way that this would be the case. I do plan to continue adding to my two photo series on the site, "What Does a Religion Major Look Like?" and "Chaplains, More than a Headshot," through graduation.

If this site were to be fully staffed and funded, there are a few things I would add to make it stronger. One would be the inclusion of personal essays, which I had originally hoped to include in the capstone. It is important that a publication focused on diversity reflect that diversity in its contributors. Other things I believe would further strengthen the site include an interfaith podcast series and strong, shareable video content.

### **Hypotheticals: Social Media Plan**

Were this site to continue being updated in future years, social media would be key component in reaching and engaging with its target audience. The social media approach for this site would be across three platforms — Instagram, Facebook and

Twitter, in that order. Instagram would receive priority because, according to the Pew Research Center, 71 percent of those in the 18-24 age group (the site's target audience) use Instagram, and those with college education are statistically more likely to use the platform. As a visuals-first app, Instagram would provide the opportunity to share moments from spiritual life on campus (See figure 2, right, for an example post). *The Campus Believer's* Instagram posts would be a combination of images promoting new articles from the site and supplemental pictures and photo series'. Facebook would be second priority because it is the best platform for directly sharing articles from the site, and it is also used by 80 percent of those aged 18-24. The site would have a Twitter account, since 45 percent of the 18-24 age group use it. However, this platform would be lowest priority because it functions as a newsier resource, which doesn't fit as well into the feature-heavy function of this site.



Getting followers for the accounts would be another major aspect of this social media plan, and I could accomplish this by reaching out to the various spiritual life groups and leaders within Hendricks Chapel. The students following those accounts are within the site's target audience, so cross-promoting would help gain new followers.

**Outcomes and Reach: Sharing my Work**

Although I was not able to create a full social media profile for my publication, the collection of stories will reach portions of its intended audience. After going live, I plan to work with Hendricks Chapel and its social media curators to share my capstone site via Facebook and Twitter.



## **SOURCES (Critical Statement):**

- *Hendricks Chapel Review Report* (Rep.). (2016). Retrieved from [http://hendricks.syr.edu/\\_documents/Hendricks Study --FINAL REPORT 11-23\\_All Descriptions.pdf](http://hendricks.syr.edu/_documents/Hendricks%20Study%20--FINAL%20REPORT%2011-23_All%20Descriptions.pdf)
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