



The New York Times

MARCH 5, 2012

Ham, Holidays and Other Puzzles as Medical College Shifts Its Religious Affiliation

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

VALHALLA, N.Y. — New York Medical College was planning to change its affiliation to Jewish from Catholic when an employee approached Rabbi Moshe D. Krupka in the cafeteria, voice raised and finger wagging, and demanded, “When you take over, will I be able to eat my ham sandwich here?”

A nervous hush fell over the room on that day two years ago. Some students and workers had protested the impending takeover by Touro College, while others were just nervous, unsure what to expect. The college officials giving Rabbi Krupka his first tour were mortified by the confrontation, but curious about his answer.

The rabbi, a senior vice president at Touro, cut the tension with a most rabbinic reply: “It depends.”

“On what?” the man asked.

“On whether you like ham,” the rabbi answered.

Institutions of higher education

switch religious affiliations, as New York Medical College did nine months ago, so rarely that there really is no playbook to follow. It has meant addressing countless wary questions as they arise, including where to install mezuzas in doorways — 108 so far — and where people may be allowed to carry a cup of coffee.

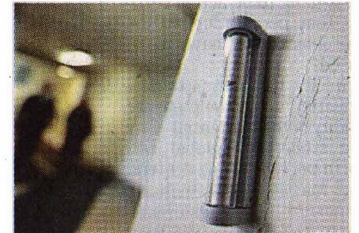
Some teachers and students worried about a loss of identity; others said Touro lacked the prestige to be a suitable sponsor. But as Rabbi Krupka’s reaction suggested in that cafeteria exchange, the shift has been subtle for most people. “There was a lot of speculating and worrying,” said Matthew Pravetz, a Franciscan priest and a professor of anatomy who has been at the medical school since 1982. In reality, he said, the biggest change may be scheduling classes around Jewish holidays, “but I don’t think anyone minds having more days off.”

Students wondered if they would find

the library locked on the Jewish Sabbath, but it remains open — no one staffs it, but the lights work on timers, and the Internet connections stay on. When officials met to choose holidays, Rabbi Krupka said, “we got to Good Friday, and people assumed we would cross it off the list.” But he added, “We decided there was no reason not to keep it.”

Ultimately, the change may be less profound for the medical school than for Touro, a move up in prestige with a well-known subsidiary and a new academic field. The medical school gained a with the appointment of Dr. Edward C. Halperin, previously the dean of the University of Louisville’s medical school and a former vice dean at Duke’s medical school.

The medical school takeover continues Touro’s aggressive expansion, from its start in 1971 as a 35-student college in Manhattan to one with dozens of campuses across the country and overseas,



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A mezuzah placed at the formerly Catholic New York Medical College.

and with some 19,000 students.

Since it was founded by Bernard Lander, an Orthodox rabbi and a sociologist who served as president until his death in 2010, Touro has identified itself as a Jewish institution engaged with worldly problems. It has long had a mostly non-Jewish student body, with particular appeal to older students and immigrants.

In the past 15 years, Touro has opened a graduate school of business and three schools of osteopathic medicine, and it was a pioneer in online education, before selling that operation in 2007. Touro has been known for a barebones administration and for having low tuition costs for a private college — undergraduates pay about \$25,000 a year in tuition, room and board.

The relative lack of structure may have contributed to its occasionally being in the news for the wrong reasons, as in 2007, when two people, including an administrator, were indicted for falsifying transcripts in exchange for bribes. Dr. Alan H. Kadish, a noted cardiologist who became president of Touro two years ago, said that acquiring the medical school was a natural expansion for a college with osteopathic schools and popular undergraduate programs in medical science, and was not about raising Touro’s

“It really was the logical next step,” he said. He declined to be specific about future expansions, but said, “There are probably 10 proposals on my desk right now.”

With about 800 M.D. students and nearly as many in related

graduate programs, New York Medical College, which is in Westchester County, has long been the major supplier of student doctors to its next-door neighbor, Westchester Medical Center, and to Metropolitan Hospital in Manhattan. In its early decades, the college, founded in 1860, was unusually open to women and minorities.

In the late 1970s, facing financial trouble, the medical school agreed to be sponsored by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York. The college did not become a Catholic institution, like Notre Dame or Boston College, but a college “in the Catholic tradition,” operating with fewer church restrictions.

Touro officials said on taking over that they were surprised to discover that there were no crucifixes to take down and few doctrinal limitations on curriculum to reverse. It already taught topics like contraceptive and fertility

Addressing wary questions about the Sabbath and where to carry cups of coffee.

treatments that the church opposed. Dr. Kadish said that as far as he knew, the only area the school might embark on that it shunned during its Catholic affiliation was embryonic stem cell research.

The medical school’s chapel was never church-consecrated, so no formal decommissioning was needed.

As for how Jewish to make things, officials played it by ear. Mezuzas, the little boxed Hebrew prayer scrolls mounted on door jambs, were installed at building entrances but not auditoriums or classrooms. Professors chose whether to have them outside their offices, and after the tradition was explained, some non-Jewish professors requested them.

The one area in which strict Jewish standards apply is the cafeteria, whose kitchen operates under kosher rules and rabbinic supervision. The old kitchen equipment was thrown out or blowtorched in a cleansing ritual.

Lacking space for two sets of everything — one for cooking and serving meat, the other for dairy — it was decided that this would be a meat kitchen, un-

touched by milk products. A griddle was set aside solely for making eggs, which can fit into either category. Pastries made in a factory that uses dairy products are acceptable, as long as they are individually wrapped, and opened somewhere else.

“This was a huge learning curve for me, and I’m Jewish,” said Todd Kurtis, the dining director.

The rules extend only as far as the cash registers, which divide the kosher serving area from the nonkosher dining commons, where any food from outside is welcome.

But about that cup of coffee.

With milk forbidden, a table was set aside in the common area for adding ingredients to hot drinks. Once milk is added to a cup, the drink may not go back across that invisible barrier into the serving area, much less into the kitchen. There is no sign to that effect, but the rule was explained. Repeatedly.

“At the beginning, a couple of times, there was almost a flying tackle of somebody,” Mr. Kurtis said. “But everyone’s gotten the message.”