

Department of Religion receives \$1 million to establish program in Jain studies

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Advocates from across the country are partnering with universities, including the University of Illinois, to include the study of Jainism, a South Asian religion that emphasizes nonviolence, non-possessiveness, and respect for other viewpoints.



Ancient Jain statues carved out of rock found in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India (Stock image.)

[The Department of Religion](#) at the

University of Illinois is receiving \$1 million from a group of donors to establish Jainism as a course of study. It's the largest gift that the department has ever received.

The University of Illinois is the 28th school that will develop a Jain studies program.

"I think students campus wide will respond enthusiastically," said Jon Ebel, department head. "There is just so much about Jainism that is fascinating, and it's so much that students want and need to learn about."

Universities commonly include Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in their religion studies programs. However, a new effort to expand Jain studies on campuses started when the International School for Jain Studies opened in India in 2004. The school drew international academic recognition and created scholars of Jainism outside of India. Since then, more than 800 scholars from more than 26 universities have traveled to India for an immersion Jainism experience.

Jainism is a nontheistic religion that originated thousands of years ago in India. The religion took its present shape around 500 B.C. — around the same time period Buddhism was founded. It's

practiced by about six to seven million people who believe in three core principles of not harming living creatures, only owning items necessary to live, and not imposing viewpoints on other people. For example, followers of Jainism are vegetarian or vegan and catch and release bugs outside instead of killing them if they're inside.

It's one of the oldest continuously practiced religions in the world, with many followers in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

"We wanted to make India a classroom, so they don't see it in books only. They'd see a living tradition," said Sulekh Jain, who is helping lead efforts to promote Jain studies in higher education and is one of the founders of the International School for Jain Studies.

Now, 17 years after the school was founded in India, donors have raised close to \$18 million to donate to schools across the world to establish programs. The Department of Religion at the University of Illinois is the third school in the Midwest that will launch a program (the other two in the Midwest are the University of Chicago and the University of Wisconsin-Madison).

With the donation, the department will request that a tenure stream position be established for a faculty member who will specialize in Jainism. Two faculty members already in the department are also interested in furthering lessons about Jainism in their classes. The department also hopes to create a postdoctoral or non-tenure stream faculty member position to start building a curriculum for Jainism.

Florida International University was one of the first U.S. schools to establish a program in Jainism, in 2010. Many other schools in Southern California soon followed.

"We usually look for the universities and places where we have some connections with the Jain community in that area or we have some lead," said Jasvant Modi, a donor who has [pledged about \\$13 million](#) total to establish Jain studies in higher education.

Prior to offering funding to universities, the donors examine the school's religion offerings to see what was already being offered.

"Most of the universities, not all, already have Buddhism and Hinduism, so Jainism was a really nice fit," Jain said.

The donors have also begun conversations with schools overseas in New Zealand, Israel and Belgium. The initial conversations with the U of I began about nine months ago.

"We think that by (exposing students to) more different viewpoints, they will be better citizens of the United States and global cities," Modi said.

One of the coordinators for the effort, Nitin Shah, an anesthesiologist and intensivist, works to

bridge the gap between the universities and donors. Shah said he has been an academician all his life and currently teaches anesthesiology and critical care at Loma Linda University.

The donors are interested in seeing the Department of Religion establish a faculty position for Jainism. The person filling the position does not have to be a devout follower of Jainism, they said, but they should have the knowledge to be able to create a program.

Ebel said that they were grateful for the group's generosity.

"They understand that funding for higher education is always precarious," he said. "Private philanthropy like they're engaged in is one way to make sure that programs and courses are secure in the future. I couldn't be happier that they decided to make this gift."

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