



DESIGNING INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR CAMPUS TYPE

INTERFAITH YOUTH CORE

Every campus possesses assets and challenges when creating opportunities for interfaith cooperation. Considering these particular aspects can be useful when designing interfaith activities. An activity that might be effective on campuses with rich histories of service may fall flat on campuses with few student groups; engaging religious diversity will look different for campuses with diverse student bodies compared to campuses with many students coming from similar religious backgrounds. This resource will provide opportunities to reflect on those challenges and assets your campus faces when trying to create opportunities for interfaith cooperation and will offer examples of interfaith activities that have been impactful for particular types of campuses.

CAMPUS CONTEXT: Homogenous or Rural Campuses

Robert Putnam and David Campbell's research in *American Grace*¹ shows that people who have cooperated with people of a different worldview towards a common goal not only have more positive attitudes about the group they worked with, but also have increased positive attitudes for religious and nonreligious identities different than their own.

However, finding these opportunities for engagement can be difficult for campuses in which the student population comes from largely similar religious backgrounds and on campuses located in remote areas where religious diversity may not be apparent. A key question for campuses in this context is how to create opportunities for meaningful relationship-building across religious differences when religious diversity seems scarce.

Solution: Davidson College is located in Davidson, North Carolina, a city where most of the population identifies as Christian or religiously unaffiliated. The campus reflects this population. Davidson staff members decided to make an intentional effort to identify and engage with religious diversity. For students from minority religions on campus they provide an interfaith space and services. The college also partners with the community to identify opportunities to engage across religious difference. Recently, Davidson College hosted the area's Jewish community for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Over 300 people participated, a direct result of Davidson's ongoing efforts to build relationships with the local Jewish community. Community partnerships are meaningful ways to identify and build relationships across religious difference.

CAMPUS CONTEXT: Over-programmed Campuses, Commuter Campuses

The world students will graduate into is religiously diverse and students are poorly served if they do not have opportunities to engage religious diversity constructively before graduating. Despite this reality, it can be difficult to help students prioritize interfaith cooperation with competing priorities of full course loads, work schedules, co-curricular activities, and other responsibilities. Interfaith experiences and activities are important, but are only effective if students actually show up for them. With all of these competing responsibilities, how do you help students prioritize interfaith cooperation?

¹ Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Solution: Xavier University in Ohio aims to give every student an opportunity to think about the roles religious and ethical worldviews play in public life at least once before graduating. To this end, they employ a range of strategies to support students' interaction with people from faith and philosophical traditions different than their own, as well as reflect on the beliefs that inspire them to action. High investment opportunities ask for daily or weekly involvement, while low investment activities invite students to engage in interfaith service without an ongoing commitment. High investment opportunities—opportunities that require a serious commitment of time and energy from students—include summer internships and weekly service programs, while low investment opportunities include Alternative Breaks and Community Action Days. Taking it one step further, Xavier is experimenting with a co-curricular course require for all first year students to help them learn about engaging across diversity. Students in this course will spend a week thinking about engaging religious diversity constructively.

CAMPUS CONTEXT: Diverse Campuses, Campuses in Urban Environments

It is easy to assume that if religious diversity exists on campus then meaningful connections across that difference will happen naturally. However, without real intentionality, students can spend four years on campus without exploring the religious or ethical tradition that shapes their own worldviews, or creating relationships to learn about worldviews different than their own. This can even occur in programming that focuses on bringing diverse groups together but does not invite students to take the time to explore those differences. What strategies can help students engage the religious diversity that surrounds them?

Solution: Located in Portland, Oregon, Warner Pacific College shares its campus with communities containing rich and diverse histories and large refugee populations. In addition to the diversity of its community, Warner Pacific's student body has grown more diverse over the past decade, including in the increase variety of religious and worldview identities. Rather than housing these efforts in one office, interfaith action come from student groups, first year learning experiences, pedagogical approaches in the religion department, and administrative priorities. Staff and faculty intentionally engage religious diversity to support students' understanding of their own worldviews and that of others. Service opportunities also include moments to reflect on the religious or philosophical reasons that inspired people to serve; interfaith service is even a pillar in the institution's service learning strategic plan. Students also learn about the religious identities of the people they serve and find ways to improve their work with this knowledge. This intentionality is also reflected in the classroom. Courses about world religions are taught with an interfaith posture, inviting neighbors from the community into the classroom to share about the practice of their faith and how their faith plays a role in the way they engage the world.

Key Take Aways

As you consider how best to create opportunities for interfaith engagement, here are some key strategies to keep in mind:

- 1) Find ways to connect your campus with the broader community to unearth opportunities for interaction across difference.**
- 2) Integrating your interfaith work into already existing programs can increase participation for students who cannot otherwise commit because of other responsibilities.**
- 3) Don't assume religious diversity equals engagement. Make space for students to explore ways religious and philosophical identities can cooperate for the common good.**