

# Serving as an Ally to Students: Strategies from the Field



## INTRODUCTION

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Professionals at institutions of higher education are trained to support students throughout their college experience, navigating the complex development of identity and responsible citizenship. As more students join interfaith programs like Better Together, the support of an ally can make the difference between a good campaign and great one.

In this resource, we define an *ally* as a professional staff and/or faculty member who supports students' interfaith efforts on campus. Allies connect students to funding and other resources, campus and community partners, and the overall vision for interfaith cooperation at their institution.

Staff and faculty carry many responsibilities on campus and have limited time to dedicate to their role as ally, so this resource focuses on concrete strategies allies can take to build their support for students' interfaith work. The qualities of an exemplary student ally are numerous, and in many ways a reflection of what makes a great educator in general—recognizing talent, creating opportunities, modeling healthy engagement across lines of difference, and building partnerships with students. Included below are a few examples of stand-out allies at various colleges and universities and the approaches they take to their role.

## MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

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A good first step for allies is looking for students who are already demonstrating leadership potential on campus. By developing relationships with students in positions of influence within their own faith communities or other leadership programs on campus, allies create connections between interfaith initiatives and other aspects of campus life. Student leaders may not be in formal positions of leadership on campus however, and some of the best interfaith leaders are students who work quietly but diligently toward their goals. Great allies recognize leadership potential in students across the board.



### TODD BOLING

**ASSOCIATE CHAPLAIN—  
INTERFAITH COMMUNITY &  
SPIRITUAL WELLNESS**

**Texas Christian University,  
Fort Worth, TX**

“ *There is something to be said about the student who can simply sit with someone and hear their story and be fully present in their story with them. You can miss that kind of student if you’re not really looking.* ”

At TCU, Todd approaches existing student organizations to formally invite them to participate in interfaith service activities. At meetings with the Muslim Student Association, Hillel, and the Secular Student Alliance, he looks for students who display a curiosity for interfaith cooperation and provides specific invitations to upcoming opportunities for involvement.

Here are, in brief, the attributes Todd looks for in potential interfaith leaders:

1. The ability to form connections with people and can relate to others.
2. The ability to verbalize what they believe and ask people questions from a place of better understanding.
3. A passion for interfaith cooperation that people want to connect with and find themselves.
4. Demonstrate active and engaged listening skills.

Additionally, Todd encourages students to play to their strengths—quieter students who prefer behind the scenes leadership are often in charge of logistics, while more extroverted students focus on recruitment.

## GROUND INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT IN DIRECT SERVICE

Interfaith engagement doesn't begin and end with dialogue, but in acting on shared values in service to the common good. Allies help students remember to base their interfaith activities in service projects on and off campus. A shared experience of service roots students in relationship with one another, providing common ground despite theological or philosophical difference. Interfaith action also provides the opportunity for students to strengthen the relationship between their campus and the surrounding community—whether local or national—and provides an alternate narrative of interfaith cooperation to the one of religious tension and conflict.



### LYNNE MEYER

**DIRECTOR OF SPIRITUAL LIFE  
AND SERVICE LEARNING**

**Illinois Institute of Technology,  
Chicago, IL**

“**You only have limited time and resources as an ally. Try to capitalize on things students are going to be doing anyway.**”

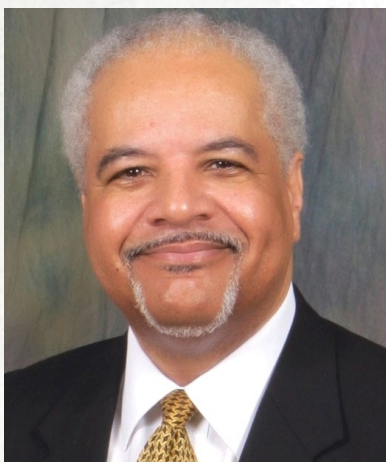
When recruiting students to participate in interfaith service opportunities, Lynne capitalizes on her institution's rich diversity and strong history of service to the community by communicating the importance of connecting one's values to action. In Lynne's words *“Students understand the importance of giving back no matter what language they speak. There is a lot of faith here, but students aren't always comfortable talking about it... Service is often a safe place for that voice to be heard.”*

Organizing an annual Service Retreat with the university's Camras Scholars (an honors scholarship program requiring community service hours) provided the chance for interfaith engagement and happened in partnership with the **Sacred Keepers Sustainability Lab**, engaging with local community members on the South Side of Chicago around ecological conservation.

## CONNECT STUDENTS TO CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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Interfaith cooperation extends beyond campus, and allies who recognize the opportunity for interfaith engagement in the outside community are invaluable. In cities where interfaith and other non-profit organizations exist, allies often serve as the connection between these organizations and students interested in interfaith organizing. In addition, strong relationships with various areas of the community connect students with people, programs, and opportunities that will help them to sustain interfaith programming even after they graduate.



### REVEREND TERRY WALKER

**DIRECTOR OF CHAPEL RELATIONS,  
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.  
INTERNATIONAL CHAPEL**

**Morehouse College,  
Atlanta, GA**

**“ Look for the people whose eyes light up when you talk about interfaith relations and find ways for them to talk to each other; the networking piece is critical. ”**

Atlanta is one of the most active cities in the nation in terms of interfaith cooperation, with multiple organizations around the city offering opportunities for students to serve. With this in mind, along with the chapel’s commitment to being “intentionally interfaith, international and intercultural,” Reverend Walker directs students and chapel assistants to connect with organizations like the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta (FAMA), World Pilgrims, the Compassionate Cities initiative, and other organizations that contribute to community service efforts in the West End neighborhood of Atlanta around Morehouse.

The growing international and religious diversity of the area makes cooperation increasingly necessary. The historical role that faith played in the civil rights movement in Atlanta meant that the foundation of interfaith relationships was already present, and Morehouse students have played a part in bringing it forward again today.

## HELP SUSTAIN STUDENT LEADERSHIP OVER TIME

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Better Together is a national campaign for student interfaith leadership. Allies who support students from behind the scenes often have the greatest impact in establishing interfaith programs for the long term. Creating a movement on campus is contingent upon peer-to-peer relationships, so allies who allow students to represent Better Together are not only supporting students in their development but helping the movement to sustain itself over time.



### LANE McLELLAND

DIRECTOR, CROSSROADS  
COMMUNITY CENTER

The University of Alabama,  
Tuscaloosa, AL

“*Student excitement is what spreads excitement for interfaith cooperation around a campus. I don’t ask students to handle the logistics I can do faster, but instead to focus their energy on building participation.*”

After returning from the 2012 Atlanta Interfaith Leadership Institute excited to build interfaith cooperation, Lane collaborated with students to determine the best way to go forward. One of the most important parts of building an interfaith movement on campus is student enthusiasm, and, in Lane’s words, one of the roles of an ally is to “tap into their dynamic spirit for growing the program.”

Students are the ones having conversations in the residence halls and at tabling events and it is important for them to spread the word and recruit folks to meetings and events themselves. Also, Lane focuses her energy on building partnerships with folks in the service learning office on campus and uses the existing **IFYC resources and frameworks** to guide her conversations.

## ACTION STEPS—INVEST IN YOUR OWN INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP

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Allies exist at every level of campus life. With that in mind, we recognize that it helps to have some general guidelines to center whatever approach you choose for supporting students. In 2009 the ACPA Commission for Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning created 12 competencies for Student Affairs professionals in support of students' spiritual identity and worldview development. The competencies described below are three directly applicable to interfaith engagement:

- 1.** ***Student Affairs professionals are knowledgeable regarding world religions, humanist worldviews, and diverse spiritual perspectives and when lacking information, actively seek out resources and professionals with such expertise.***

### **Action Step: Build your interfaith literacy**

Interfaith cooperation does not require that one be an expert on every religion and secular worldview, but a good amount of appreciative knowledge of various traditions can help alleviate some of the anxiety of discussing religious identity. Look for opportunities to grow your knowledge through readings and other forms of **research** but more importantly, focus on the lived practice of a tradition beyond its theology (forms of observance, holidays, styles of dress, dietary restrictions, etc.) which will be the most practically applicable in your relationships with students.

- 2.** ***Student Affairs professionals recognize their own limitations and lack of knowledge regarding spiritual, religious, or secular traditions and collaborate with campus chaplains/ministers, community leaders, teachers and other resources in providing information that supports the needs of students, faculty and staff.***

### **Action Step: Reach out**

Set up conversations with faith leaders either on campus or in the surrounding community to discuss ways to collaborate in programming and student support. Take the opportunity to share your reasons for pursuing interfaith programming and ask for their take on what will make the work successful from their perspective. Being aware of existing systems in place to support students can help you in instances where you may feel outside of your realm of expertise. Extend your conversations to professionals in the counseling center and other student support areas.

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### 3.

*Student Affairs professionals actively seek ways to foster constructive, meaningful and pluralistic dialogues on campus concerning pathways to understanding purpose and meaning making, including religious, spiritual, and secular perspectives.*

**Action Step: Look for (and create) opportunities**

One of the ways allies can have a tremendous impact on students' interfaith leadership is to model healthy interfaith engagement themselves; you can't lead where you haven't been. Can you remember the last time you had a conversation with a colleague around religious or secular identity? Think of ways to create opportunities for students to encounter folks different from them in both formal and informal ways. This may include organizing panels of interfaith leaders, inserting an option for **interfaith reflection** into an existing service learning project, or opening a classroom discussion to explore topics of religious identity and diversity. Small adjustments to work that is already happening can have a tremendous effect, and conserve limited resources and staff time.