

WHAT SHOULD I ASSESS?

First Steps for Effective Interfaith Assessment

Assessing co-curricular interfaith programs does not need to be difficult. Taking a step-by-step approach makes the process manageable and organized from the start. This document helps you succeed with the first—and most important—step of an effective interfaith assessment, which is determining a clear assessment purpose. **Arriving at a clear assessment purpose provides focus and guides the assessment questions you will ask, information you will collect, and how you might use your assessment findings.** Our two-part assessment planning resources help you determine *what* you should assess (Part 1) and *how* to do so (Part 2). This document (Part 1) will enable you to write a clear assessment purpose statement, which is a statement that explains what you hope to learn from your interfaith assessment.

By completing the questions included in this document, you will develop an interfaith assessment purpose and be ready to begin your assessment process. To get there, this resource will guide you through several questions, helping you:

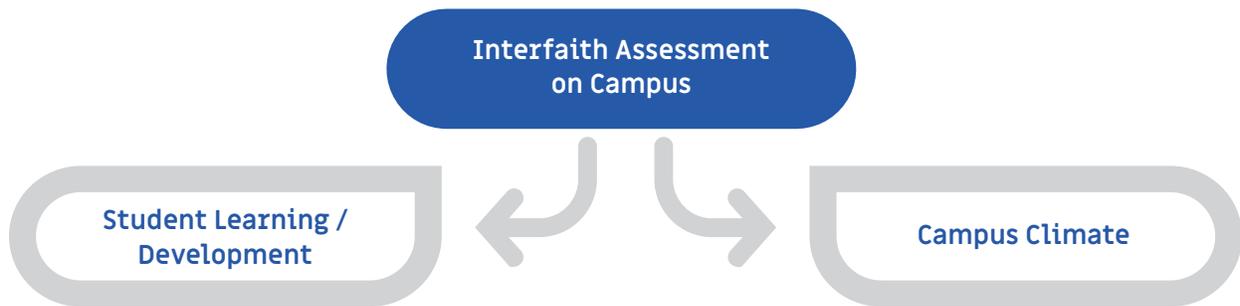
- Understand different types of interfaith assessment
- Identify a specific interfaith assessment opportunity on your campus
- Prepare for your interfaith assessment

Once you use this resource to write your interfaith assessment purpose statement, Part 2 offers a step-by-step planning tool to organize and execute your interfaith assessment project. For now, let's begin by looking at two different types of interfaith assessment, which will help inform what you would like to measure.

What is Interfaith Assessment?

Interfaith assessment is the systematic collection of information using time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available for the purpose of improving learning and development and the campus climate (Walvoord, 2010). Campus educators who do interfaith assessment want to better understand their students and campus contexts and make informed decisions that reflect this understanding.

Assessing interfaith cooperation on campus usually involves collecting information about two distinct, yet interrelated areas: (1) students' learning and development as a result of engaging in interfaith experiences and (2) students' perceptions of their campus climate for worldview diversity.



Remember that determining your interfaith assessment purpose involves identifying what you hope to learn from the assessment. Although you may want to learn about both areas described above, it is useful to choose one of these areas to assess and start there. Doing so is more feasible because the information collected and the decisions made from the interfaith assessment are more focused. This document helps you select the area in which you are more interested based on three key questions. First, read on for descriptions about interfaith assessments focused on students' learning and development as well as campus climate. Next, answer the key questions that will help you select between these two areas.

Assessment focused on students' learning and development

Campus educators in co-curricular areas are increasingly interested in understanding what college students learn from their educational experiences. What, specifically, do students take away from their various college experiences, and where is such learning happening? The following are examples of questions you could answer if your interfaith assessment focuses on students' learning and development:

- How can we understand whether our interfaith programs are effective?
- How can we explain specifically what students learn from interfaith programs?
- Does students' learning from interfaith programs differ across worldviews?

Assessment focused on campus climate

An assessment of the campus climate provides educators with important understandings of how students perceive their campus environment related to worldview diversity and interfaith engagement. The campus climate plays a critical role in facilitating the types of learning and development that result from intercultural exchange (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998). While assessing students' learning and development places evidence of student learning as the focus (i.e., to what extent do students learn?), assessing the campus climate places students' perceptions of their educational contexts as the focus (i.e., do students think their campus is conducive to productive interaction across difference?). You might seek answers to these questions if you are interested in assessing your campus climate:

- How do students perceive both positive and negative aspects of their campus climate?
- Do students think their campus fosters opportunities for meaningful interfaith exchange?
- To what extent are students engaging in interfaith experiences?

What Do You Want to Assess?

Now that you understand two different ways to focus an interfaith assessment, you can determine your assessment purpose by answering the three following questions. Answers to these questions build on each other and keep your interfaith assessment specific:

1. What is motivating your interest in interfaith assessment at this time?
2. What do you want to learn from your interfaith assessment?
3. How do you think you could use your assessment results?

You will use the answers to these questions to generate an interfaith assessment purpose statement. And with that, you'll have a solid foundation for a focused, effective interfaith assessment.

1 What is motivating your interest in interfaith assessment at this time?

It is always useful to first understand what is driving your interest in doing an interfaith assessment. This informs what you hope to learn from an assessment and how your assessment results can be used. Particular situational or institutional realities may elevate the priority to understand students' learning and development or the campus climate.

See the following lists of common situations that drive interfaith assessment. While not exhaustive, these lists should help you identify where you would like to focus your interfaith assessment.

My program wants to assess students' learning and development because of:

- Interest in understanding whether changes or improvements to existing interfaith programming are needed
- Uncertainty about what students are learning from interfaith efforts
- Need for reporting the overall effectiveness of a program at its conclusion
- Divisional or institutional assessment/accountability requirements

My campus wants to assess our climate for worldview diversity because of:

- Concerns raised about the campus climate for certain religious or nonreligious groups
- Incidents on or off campus that affect the campus climate
- Shifting student, faculty, or staff religious and nonreligious demographics
- Changes in institutional policy

1. What situation is motivating your interest in (or need to do) interfaith assessment at this time?

2 What do you want to learn from your interfaith assessment?

Depending on what is motivating your interest in or need to do interfaith assessment, it is useful to think of assessment in terms of learning something specific about your students or the campus climate.

Students' learning and development

- What did students learn because of an interfaith program?
- After participating in an interfaith program, do students achieve the program's learning outcomes?
- Should we consider changes or improvements to our program?
- Does students' learning differ across groups of students (e.g., across worldviews, particular identities, academic standing, majors)?

Campus climate for religious diversity

- To what extent do students of diverse worldviews perceive positive (accepting, supportive) and negative (divisive, discriminatory) aspects of their campus climates?
- Do students perceive that their campus provides meaningful opportunities to engage across worldview diversity?
- How do students perceive their interactions on campus across worldview difference?
- Do students' perceptions of their campus climates differ across particular student groups? In what ways?

2. Based on what is motivating your interest in interfaith assessment at this time, what do you need or hope to learn from your assessment?

3 How do you think you could use your assessment results?

Finally, thinking about how assessment results can be used—including with whom you might share your assessment results—is important to consider in the early stages of planning your interfaith assessment. Answers to the two preceding questions will help you develop a strategy for sharing your results in ways that are action-oriented. Based on what is motivating your assessment (Question #1) and what you want to learn from your assessment (Question #2), there are likely various audiences who could benefit from your assessment findings. Remember that faculty, staff, students, and off-campus partners can all benefit from learning about your interfaith assessment findings. Given this, key questions to answer in developing a strategy to share your results include:



3a. Who are the individuals/areas that are affected by/could most benefit from your assessment findings?

3b. What decisions could be made with your assessment findings?

Your Interfaith Assessment Purpose

Putting answers to these questions together to develop an assessment purpose statement is the first step in planning your interfaith assessment. This purpose statement keeps the entire assessment process—including the collection of information and sharing and using the assessment results—focused (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

Now you can write your interfaith assessment purpose statement by filling in the information below.

Based on [answer to question 1] _____

_____, this interfaith assessment will focus

on [*choose one*: students' learning and development OR campus climate for worldview diversity].

The goal for this assessment is to understand [answer to question 2] _____

_____.

These assessment results will inform [answer to question 3a] _____

_____ in determining [answer to question 3b]

_____.



Getting Started with Your Interfaith Assessment

Now that you have written your interfaith assessment purpose statement, you are ready to begin planning an assessment of students' learning and development or campus climate for worldview diversity.

Ready to get started with your interfaith assessment? Check out the Part 2 resources — How to Plan an Interfaith Assessment: A Step-by-step Guide to Assessing Students' Learning and Development or How to Plan an Interfaith Assessment: A Step-by-step Guide to Assessing Your Campus Climate — for tools to make your interfaith assessment easy, focused, and meaningful. Both resources will provide guides to help you understand:

- ✓ What is your specific interfaith assessment question?
- ✓ What information do you already know?
- ✓ What information will you need to collect to answer your assessment question?
- ✓ How and when will you collect this information?
- ✓ Who will analyze and interpret the information you collect?
- ✓ With whom will you share results?
- ✓ How can you use your interfaith assessment findings?

References

- ¹ Henning, G. W., & Roberts, D. (2016). *Student affairs assessment: Theory to practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- ² Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., & Allen, W. R. (1998). Enhancing campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity through educational policy and practice. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(3), 279-302.
- ³ Walvoord, B. E. (2010). *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

