Interfaith Engagement and Orientation Programs

Overview

For most undergraduate students, orientation programs are their first introduction to life on campus. They bring with them a set of expectations about college and an array of experiences that have prepared them for this moment. In turn, orientation programs offer a guided entry to these students—whether first year students, transfer students, or students new to U.S. educational institutions—setting expectations for the experiences that higher education offers, the culture of the campus, and the values that the institution upholds.

Understanding and engaging the religious diversity of the student population is essential for orientation programs to achieve those expectations. Like other aspects of personal identity, religious and worldview commitments have shaped students’ lives and impact the expectations they have for college and their careers. Once on campus, students will engage with individuals of their similar and/or different worldview. This resource hopes to highlight how orientation programs can support the engagement of religious, spiritual, and secular worldviews.

In this resource we will:

- highlight the value of engaging religion and worldview in orientation programs;
- offer real-life examples of orientation programs that engage religious diversity;
- provide further resources to support work in this area.

The Value of Religious Diversity in Orientation Programming

Orientation programs serve as the first meaningful engagement a student will have with the campus environment and their new peers. Each class is different from the previous one, and this incoming class is the most religiously diverse and politically polarized one that researchers have seen (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Whang Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017). Have orientation programs considered responding to this change?

As an orientation leader, director, curator, and/or facilitator, it seems essential, timely, and responsible to consider student's religious, spiritual, and secular identities as they enter the campus. The Interfaith Diversity Engagement and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) tells us that 85% of incoming first-year students have high expectations that their campuses will be welcoming environments for diverse worldviews; however, when asked how welcoming their campuses are toward specific worldviews, students report far lower acceptance rates. This presents two pressing questions to those who work in orientation:
What are first-year students observing on their college campuses that contributes to the variability between campuses being perceived to be more welcoming to certain worldviews and less to others?

We know that first-year students are coming to college expecting to engage around worldview diversity. How are we facilitating this conversation? Are we prepared to do so? And what’s the impact if we do?

**Key Terms**

**Interfaith:** This term is best understood by defining each term separately, “inter” and “faith.” “Inter” refers to the relationships between people who orient around religion differently. “Faith” is defined as the relationship between an individual and what we commonly understand as a religious or philosophical tradition. Put together, “interfaith” is about how our interactions with those who are different impact the way we relate to our religious and ethical traditions, and how our relationships with our traditions impact our interactions with those who are different from us (Patel, E., 2017).

**Religious Pluralism:** The term “pluralism” is defined in a variety of ways. IFYC draws its understanding from the work of Diana Eck, who argues that diversity is simply the fact of people with different identities interacting with one another (Eck, D., 2001). In and of itself, diversity is neither good nor bad. Pluralism, on the other hand, is an achievement. We argue that pluralism has three main parts—respect for all parts of identity, relationships between people and communities who orient around religion differently, and common action for the common good.

**Worldview:** A guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a religious tradition, spiritual orientation, nonreligious perspective, or some combination of these. (Mayhew et al., 2016). It is the foundational outlook one has on life that helps in making sense of the world.

**Campus Profiles**

**Benedictine University—Service and Values in Orientation Programs**

Benedictine University, a Catholic university in Lisle, Illinois, has used orientation programming as a means of having incoming students think deeply about the values they share with others, introducing them to the diversity of the local community surrounding the campus, and inculcating the importance of service at their institution.

Benedictine does not have a specific office for orientation and much of the organization for their Orientation Week falls to multiple student-related departments, including the Campus Ministry Office. For years, new students have been asked to do service activities during Orientation Week. Campus Ministry saw this as an opportunity to utilize the existing commitment to introduce students to groups with, as they put it, “diverse representations [of identity] with diverse offerings [of services]” around their region. Campus Ministry chose over 20 local organizations to partner with in this effort; some of these were sacred places or houses of worship, like Hindu temples or Jewish synagogues, and others were community organizations run or supported by religious and non-religious groups, like homeless shelters and forest preserves.

During the beginning of Orientation Week, students signed up for the sites they wanted to visit. On the Friday of Orientation Week, all students gathered together for a student led assembly. Selected by Campus Ministry staff to represent a cross-section of the campus, these student leaders spoke about their worldview and/
or beliefs and how it inspires them to serve others. After the assembly, students were asked to write on a note card what inspires them to serve from their religious or non-religious background and to post the notes on the wall (later, the notes are distributed in smaller groups at different public spots around campus). Subsequently, students joined their service group, led by a faculty or staff member, and visited their chosen site to perform service activities and learn about the community's ongoing work.

The success of the program was immediately obvious. Post-activity surveys showed that the student-led assembly, with its display of speakers from various worldviews, helped students reflect more deeply on their own worldview. In turn, first-year students reported feeling a deeper connection between their belief system and their chosen service project. A majority of students expressed that the site visit gave them a chance to develop beneficial relationships with Benedictine faculty and staff before setting foot in the classroom. With this feedback, the Campus Ministry staff plans to make this an ongoing part of each orientation and incorporate other values from the Benedictine tradition into future activities.

Takeaways

- Orientation events are excellent opportunities to highlight the values that many different worldviews hold in common.
- Service activities during an Orientation Week offer a chance to showcase community partners and highlight the diversity of your local campus and community.
- Orientation programming devoted to interfaith programming can make a particular impact if tied directly to the campus' mission.

Wellesley College—Connecting with New Students and Training Current Ones

The orientation schedule is fully packed with programming at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. A dedicated committee of staff and faculty from across the college, including the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, guides the strategy and sets the schedule for orientation. From this perch, the Dean has been able to advise on practical issues (like when to provide breaks in the schedule for different religious observances) and shape strategic choices, such as the creation of a “Soulful Sunday” event on the Sunday morning of Orientation Week. That morning is given over to programming solely dedicated to engaging worldview identity and offers two distinct events for every hour of the morning schedule. One of these events will be connected to a specific tradition (examples include meditation practices for Hindu students or mezuzah making for Jewish students) and the other event encourages broader worldview reflection for all students (examples include a labyrinth walk or a workshop on how to keep a spiritual journal).

These “Soulful Sunday” events are the only events scheduled at this time; this is an intentional choice to signal to students that these are meaningful opportunities within the orientation schedule. The staff of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life plan and help lead this portion of the schedule and thus also get to know many of the students personally and connect them with further resources that are helpful as they begin their time at Wellesley.

These activities have engaged students in their own religious, spiritual, and secular journeys as well as exposed them to the diversity of worldviews found on their campus. It also communicated the fact that Wellesley values the cultivation of personal worldview identity and engagement across lines of difference. Highlighting these events at orientation has increased student participation in Religious and Spiritual Life events as they have felt encouraged to explore, engage, and learn more about worldview on their campus.
Training Student Leaders

Paired with the programming work during the week itself, the Religious and Spiritual Life Office also offers religious diversity training to student leaders. Led by students from the multifaith group on campus, these trainings are aimed at students in campus leadership positions and trained paraprofessionals (first year mentors, residence assistants, and academic tutors, for instance) that will be interacting with incoming students during orientation week and throughout the school year. Recognizing the already busy schedules for student leaders and paraprofessionals, these religion-focused modules were integrated into the students’ typical training schedule during the year, with a refresher session in the summer before major orientation programming. These sessions provide data and demographics on the religious diversity of Wellesley, basic skills for creating a sense of welcome to students from many diverse backgrounds, and practical resources like food/dietary guidelines for different religious groups.

A part of the training is the exploration of specific case studies around religious diversity related to the roles these students play on campus. One case study examined how to build inclusive and welcoming common spaces and hall decorations for students in the residence halls. The student leaders reported effusive feedback on the trainings and mentioned that these opportunities allowed them to broach topics they had seen in their work but not previously been given a chance to talk about.

The success of these trainings was built on the deeply collaborative relationship between the Religious and Spiritual Life Office and the Student Life Department. The offices saw these trainings as going to the heart of orientation programs: the ability to support students in ‘orienting’ themselves and their identity in an unfamiliar environment.

Takeaways

- Creating intentional time to reflect on worldview during the orientation schedule gives students the chance to connect their identity with their new campus home.
- Proactively helping student leaders prepare to welcome a religiously diverse range of students is a needed and critical aspect of orientation work.
- Cross-departmental partnerships and committees around orientation work offer a chance to learn from different areas of campus while supporting overlapping departmental goals.

Reflection

As you consider incorporating religious, spiritual, and secular engagement into your own orientation programming, here are a few things to consider:

- What spaces for spiritual expression and support are on your campus? How are those spaces communicated to new students?
- Do you share your personal worldview in your remarks?
- Is the religious diversity of the campus highlighted and/or discussed throughout the various presentations?
- Does the orientation schedule highlight prayer/meditation spaces?
- Have you partnered with multicultural affairs or religious studies departments, among other potential partners?
- Does the schedule take into consideration prayer times and religious holidays?
• Have you incorporated religion into the experiential learning activities?
• During orientation is there a time dedicated for students to meet religious, spiritual, secular, and faith-based organizations? If not, how can students easily access this information on their own?
• Have you asked your student leaders to share their belief system while facilitating ice breakers?
• Do your student leaders represent various worldview perspectives?
• Have you trained your student leaders on religious/worldview identity and provided foundational knowledge on diverse worldviews?
• How can you connect worldview engagement to your institution's values?
• How does religious diversity fit within broader engagement of other forms of diversity and identity in your orientation programming?

References