

Making It Real—A Guide for Interfaith Friendly Events

The interfaith movement and Better Together intentionally represent and bring together a diverse group of students and allies across many different religious and ethical identities. Respecting these identities is important—by creating a safe and welcoming space for all traditions you both showcase these identities and empower yourself and your fellow students to make interfaith service a reality on your campus.

Being an interfaith leader doesn't mean you need to be a religious scholar—knowing everything about every tradition—but you do need to be mindful of certain considerations when planning an inclusive event. Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind when organizing your event:

Calendar & Holidays. Classes ... athletic events ... concerts ... extracurricular activities ... naptime—all these are important times for the typical college student. When planning an interfaith event, the time is similarly important. Looking at the big picture, you want to avoid scheduling events that conflict with religious holidays for students such as Rosh Hashanah, Easter, or Diwali. On a weekly basis, be aware of scheduling conflicts that might leave some students out, and make sure you ask the diverse student organizations on your campus for times that don't work well for their groups. Events on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday should especially be noted for time of day, so your event doesn't conflict with a religious service. Here is a handy interfaith calendar to refer to in your planning:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tools/calendar/>

Food. If there's one thing that unites college students, it's love of food. Interfaith work is no different but being aware of dietary requirements is crucial to making sure your events are inclusive. When providing food at an event, be conscious of religious obligations—such as keeping kosher for Jews, following halal for Muslims, or eating vegetarian for many Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus. Also, some students restrict their diet during certain times and holidays. Scheduling a 5K Interfaith Run and expecting Muslims to participate during Ramadan is not the coolest idea in the world.

Social. “Setting the mood” does not just describe lighting scented candles and playing soft music. It's a good phrase to think about when designing interfaith activities. Will the event allow students to dress modestly, while being comfortable? Will physical contact be necessary between students of different genders? Will time be allowed, if needed, for prayer and other daily rituals? Allowing time and space for prayer and certain rituals is important, but so is proactively acknowledging that that space exists.

Inclusive of Faith and Non-Faith Identities. Part of what makes interfaith work so exciting is that it intentionally brings together so many different people, of all different kinds of faith and non-faith backgrounds. So as you're planning your event, think about the following: will it be inherently welcoming to students of all faith identities? Would a secular humanist, agnostic, or atheist student feel included and comfortable? Maybe some of your fellow organizers will think “Wine Tasting Better Together” is a great idea without realizing that they will be excluding those whose traditions prohibit alcohol. Always think about making sure everyone feels welcome and can participate when planning your event. No one is an expert on every faith or non-faith identity, so focus on what works for your campaign. If you have any questions about what a particular group might or might not be comfortable with, just ask!

Working on Issues of Common Concern. Social action is a powerful tool for bringing diverse people together, but not every action project is interfaith friendly. Thinking about issues that would appeal to a wide-range of faith and non-faith communities is crucial as well. For instance, campaigns or events focused on hot-button political issues might work against the respectful and inclusive atmosphere you hope to create. Similarly, campaigns or events focused on divisive social issues might turn-off many students interested in building a respectful interfaith group. Think about how your respect for diversity can be a source of strength and inspiration in your campaign, your issues, and your event.

Interfaith on the Interwebs:

There's no tool out there that can tell you everything you want to know about every tradition. You'll inevitably run into something you don't know about, and when that happens, the best policy is just to be honest about what you don't know and ask lots of questions. Still, you may want to do some research on your own. Here are some great outside sources to check it out for further information on interfaith work:

The Pluralism Project Resources – <http://pluralism.org/resources/tradition/index.php> - The Pluralism Project has put together great guides and Internet resources about all different faiths within the United States.

IFYC Blog (<http://www.ifyc.org/stay-informed>) – IFYC's own blog gives voice to current student interfaith leaders engaging with contemporary interfaith issues on campus.

Patheos: Faith Channels (www.patheos.com) – Patheos highlights different blogs by student and youth leaders across faith and philosophical traditions.

RavelUnRavel Project (<http://ravelunravel.com/>) – When you've watched one too many cat videos, check out Project Interfaith's videos of young people speaking about their religious and spiritual identities.

State of Formation (<http://www.stateofformation.org/resources/>) – State of Formation collects the works of young scholars around issues relating to current interfaith work.

Interfaith Literacy Quiz — <http://www.ifyc.org/quiz>: Don't worry, this doesn't count towards your GPA. Take IFYC's fun quiz to test your own knowledge of interfaith history.

