



Making it Interfaith//

Incorporating Interfaith Cooperation to Existing Programming on Campus



As religious diversity plays a growing role in events and discourse at the local, global, and national levels, American colleges and universities are poised to engage it in a way that fosters student development and shapes truly global citizens. Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) partners with colleges and universities to take a holistic, “ecological” approach to religious diversity, working with stakeholders across campus to foster sustainable commitment and measurable outcomes. Our partnerships also empower student leaders to be interfaith organizers and to ask how religious diversity should be understood and engaged by the entire student body. The result is a **campus climate of interfaith cooperation**, characterized by respect for individual religious and non-religious identities, mutually inspiring relationships across lines of difference, and a commitment to working together for the common good.

➤ *How to Use This Tool*

When we partner with campuses, many of the people we work with are veterans to running exceptional student programs but brand new to interfaith programming. Interfaith work, both for students and campus staff, can feel intimidating to just dive into. People often ask, “What if I don’t know enough about other religions to do interfaith work?” or “What if I don’t know enough about what I believe to do interfaith work?” and even worse – “What if I offend someone because I don’t do or say the right thing?” However, the good news is that a lot of the skills you have already developed through your work on campus are translatable to interfaith cooperation. The following tool will give you guidelines and prompts for adding an intentional interfaith component to the excellent programming you already do, as well as help you think about how to make your existing programs interfaith friendly.



➤ *Overview// What Makes it Interfaith?*

Harvard scholar Diana Eck points out that “diversity” in and of itself is a neutral term, merely descriptive. It tells us about the kinds of people in a given community but nothing about how people in that space interact. Interfaith cooperation, in contrast, seeks to engage religious diversity intentionally toward a positive end by creating mutually inspiring relationships and a commitment to the common good. This means that having a diverse group of religious and non-religious students present for a program is not enough – they need

opportunities to work together and to talk and reflect on that shared action. Students must engage key questions: what personal values bring each of us to work together today? How are our inspirations to serve similar – and very different? Many of the programs that happen on your campus may already involve religiously diverse students working together; this tool will help you open up opportunities for intentional interfaith conversation and reflection within those existing programs or to start your own intentional interfaith action programs.

Whereas many models of interfaith programming are dialogue focused, IFYC's model is action focused, seeking to create opportunities for people of different religious and non-religious identities to work together on issues of common concern. Working together creates a shared experience from which conversation can begin, building a foundation for tackling future, difficult dialogues. Even just basic conversation around religion can be – no pun intended – a revelation. Talking about religion and values, for both religious and non-religious students, tends to be taboo, especially in mixed company, and the dominant frameworks for doing so are often focused on confrontation or condemnation. Asking students to reflect on and share how their religious and non-religious identities inspire them to work in the world opens up space for students to reclaim their values and to discover new ways of approaching religious difference.¹

➤ *Step One* // *Making Your Programming Interfaith Friendly*

The first step in creating intentional interfaith programming is to make sure that the programming offers an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for students from a range of different religious and non-religious identities. While this might seem daunting, begin by thinking about the different religious groups on your campus and how you may need to be mindful of their religious observances to ensure participation. If you do not know – or even if you think you do – it never hurts to reach out and ask how your programming can be welcoming and inviting. Not only will you be more confident that your work is on the right track, you will have done additional relationship building work with the diverse constituencies on your campus.

➤ As you reflect on your program plans, consider the following:

- ⊕ If you are focusing on **social action or service-learning**, is the issue or activity inclusive of a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives? Or might it be divisive?

Because you want to include participants from a wide representation of religious and non-religious perspectives – which often includes diverse political perspectives – do not assume that every project will be safe and welcoming.

- ⊕ Think about how you frame and talk about your programs as well. How are you advertising your event? Is it clear that all religious and non-religious identities are invited? Will students know what you mean by “interfaith?”
- ⊕ When you plan the timing of your events, are you being mindful not to interfere with religious observance? Depending on the groups involved, some days and times are simply off-limits: Friday afternoon and evening, Saturday, Sunday morning. But make sure you ask – the groups on your campus may not have a problem with programming happening during these times.
- ⊕ Now think about your event itself – will participants be able to practice their faith comfortably while participating? You should consider:
 - Does the program honor food observances? One of the easiest ways to solve for this is to serve a primarily vegetarian meal.
 - Does the program leave time for prayer and other rituals? For example, if the timing of the event overlaps with one of the daily prayers that Muslim students observe, you will want to make a break in the schedule.
 - Many religions have guidelines for interactions between genders. While this will depend on the students involved and how they practice their faith, it is best not to plan an icebreaker, for example, that involves holding hands or linking arms.

➤ *Step Two* // *Setting a Safe Space for Interfaith Conversation and Reflection*

It is important to create an intentional safe space for students to talk about their religious and non-religious values. We find it helpful to have the conversation following your service-learning or social action programming, as such programs often inherently build re-

relationships and set safe space amongst participants. At the same time, such conversations can be rich and rewarding even when they do not follow such a shared experience. As we mentioned, having this kind of conversation may be new and may even a bit off-putting for students. Inviting students to set a collective safe space for the conversation helps them to own the parameters of the conversation and feel more comfortable sharing. Keep in mind that the space can be physical as well as mental – if you have 50 students involved in your programming, you will probably want to break out into small groups for conversation and consider having student leaders guide those small group conversations.

To set safe space, begin with this prompt: “We are going to be talking about our religious and non-religious values, which means we will be talking about some of the things that are most important to each of us. What do you need from yourself and others to make sure you can feel safe in this conversation?” Invite students to suggest guidelines for the group’s conversations and write the guidelines up for the group to see. If your group gets stuck, here are some suggested guidelines that may be helpful:

- ⊙ Speak for yourself and from your experience. You do not need to be a representative of your whole religious or non-religious tradition.
- ⊙ Keep in mind that others’ religious and non-religious traditions are as important to them as yours is to you.
- ⊙ Everyone has the right to pass.
- ⊙ Agree to disagree: We do not have to come to the same conclusion on everything, and there are likely going to be fundamental differences in how we see the world.
- ⊙ Step up/Step Back: If you are speaking frequently, give others a chance; if you are not speaking, take a chance because we want to hear your thoughts.
- ⊙ Everything said is confidential.
- ⊙ Ask for clarification if you do not understand something someone else is saying.



> Step Three // Storytelling and Shared Values

One of the most basic tools for interfaith conversation and reflection is **storytelling**. Stories offer a non-divisive way to explore deep values and motivations, ensuring students speak from their own experiences rather than having to speak on behalf of their whole religious tradition. They also work to evoke the experiences of other listeners – one student’s story can inspire a multitude of other narratives along similar themes. Therefore one of your best tools for sparking interfaith conversation is probably something you are already great at: getting students to share stories with one another. As you think about how to prompt these narratives, keep these guidelines in mind:

- ⊙ Your role here is more of a facilitator; as such, you should draw more from prompts and conversation, encouraging students to drive the discussion and engage with each other’s experiences. (See Step Four!)
- ⊙ Encourage students to focus on sharing concrete, personal experiences. It is hard to disagree with someone’s story, and it will keep students from speaking in abstractions.
- ⊙ Focus on values. To start a conversation, have students tell stories about how they live out their daily lives in various ways. Students often lack the opportunity to consider how

their religious or non-religious perspective connects to their daily choices.

- ⊕ Connect student's experiences in social action or service-learning to their values. What religious or non-religious values motivate them to be involved in social action?
- ⊕ Help students realize how some of their values are shared. Prompt reflection on what values we share across lines of religious and non-religious difference and how those inform our common action.
- ⊕ Make sure students know that while we share some values, our religious and non-religious identities also hold significant differences. Encourage students to be honest about this. Explain that the goal of interfaith work is not to come to one way of thinking but to come together around what we share while appreciating our differences.

➤ *Step Four* *Prompts for Interfaith Conversation and Reflection*

As a whole, setting a safe, intentional space and emphasizing storytelling and shared values tends to result in a natural and vibrant conversation. And keep in mind: while the safe space guidelines are helpful for a more formal, intentional interfaith conversation following a service-learning or social action project, you also have regular opportunities to engage students in more informal conversation and reflection. Many of the prompts below can be used to facilitate both formal and informal conversations. Use these ideas to spark your imagination!

- ⊕ Talk about one activity outside of classes you are involved in - it could be work, service-learning, sports, or student government. How do your religious or non-religious values motivate you to stay involved? Can you detail one experience where you were able to live these values out in this setting?
- ⊕ Share a meaningful social action experience you had. How did your values motivate you to get involved? How did you get to put those values into practice in your social action?

- ⊕ How did your values motivate you to get involved with this event today? How did you get to see those values "in action" today?
- ⊕ Share one person from your religious or non-religious tradition or background that inspired you to get involved in interfaith action.
- ⊕ Share one text, story, or song from your religious or non-religious tradition or background that inspired you to get involved in interfaith action.
- ⊕ What values do you think you share with people of other religious and non-religious identities? Share an experience where you saw these shared values in action.
- ⊕ Share one experience where you saw the power of working together around shared values.
- ⊕ How did today's experience change the way you think about your relationships with people of other religious and non-religious identities?
- ⊕ Imagine 10 years from now: a world where people of different religious and non-religious identities worked together on the basis of shared values. How would our campus look different? How would the U.S. look different? How would you act differently?
- ⊕ How does the civil rights movement exemplify interfaith cooperation? How do you think interfaith cooperation affected the impact of the civil rights movement? How does it connect to our work today?
- ⊕ Share one experience where you realized the importance of religious diversity in the U.S.
- ⊕ Imagine you heard about an incident of religious discrimination on campus. What would you do?
- ⊕ How would you share what you learned today about other religious or non-religious perspectives with a friend? What would you tell them?

➤ Next Steps //

Excited about what you've read here? Check out IFYC's Better Together Campaign (ifyc.org/better-together and [facebook.com/WeAreBetterTogether](https://www.facebook.com/WeAreBetterTogether)) to join a nation-wide movement of campuses committed to proving that people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds are Better Together. Visit our website for tools (ifyc.org/resources), posters, videos and more to get the movement going on your campus, or come to one of our Interfaith Leadership Institutes to get trained to run the campaign with hundreds of students and staff from campuses around the country: ifyc.org/content/leadership-institutes.

IFYC is also available to come directly to your campus to train student leaders, staff, and faculty in developing and leading interfaith action programs on campus. For more information, visit ifyc.org/content/faculty-staff.



1. It is worth noting that our approach, while emphasizing shared values and common actions, should not deny the real differences and disagreements that exist between religious and non-religious perspectives, nor should it diminish the reality that exclusive truths play in many religious differences. For more, see Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, "Defining Religious Pluralism: A Response to Professor Robert McKim," *The Journal of College and Character* 11, no. 2 (2010).