

# Planning an Interfaith Potluck: Bring Your Own Beliefs

## Why a potluck?

America has been called a “melting pot,” but what if you brought your best dish to a dinner and you were met at the door with a giant machine that melted it into the same bland goo as everybody else’s best dish? That would be a nightmare.

On the contrary, *the whole point* of a potluck is the diversity of dishes. Potlucks are a celebration of pluralism. They rely on the contributions of a diverse community. If people don’t bring an offering, the potluck doesn’t exist. If everyone brings the same thing, the potluck is boring. With that in mind, here’s your how-to guide in spreading this message to your campus.

## Why an *interfaith* potluck?

The interfaith potluck is a way to introduce religious diversity as another significant part of who we are and how we might relate to one another, driving forward the idea that religious diversity should be actively engaged as a strength.

We believe that creating a society that values religious diversity is crucial to building relationships that strengthen our civic cohesion. If we want people of divergent values to work together in solving issues we collectively face, we will have to begin by talking to one another about what matters to us most.

This guide outlines the three big components of an interfaith potluck event: eating, presenting, and sharing.

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## Event flow: Eat. Present. Share.

### Eat.

This part is straightforward, but it requires a bit of preparation to ensure it goes smoothly. Once you’ve identified your guest list, send out a sign-up sheet labeled with the different categories of dishes you’d like at the potluck (e.g. appetizer, side dish, dip, dessert, etc.) It’s a good idea to work with your dining hall in providing a main entrée or two, then fill the rest out with guest contributions. Be sure that the sign-up sheet also has a place to specify important dietary information (contains nuts, dairy, vegan-friendly, etc.). Since this is an interfaith event, you might want to consider foregoing pork items entirely.

Clearly label each dish and arrange them all just before the event starts (consider if some people need crockpots, particular serving utensils, etc.). Then let people dish up, settle in, perhaps listen to some good music, and chat with one another.



Finally, once it seems that people have settled in and have had some time to start eating, feel out the right moment to formally welcome them (if this is an hour-long event, this will probably be around 20 minutes into the activity). When you welcome them, offer up some gratitude for all the food and the people who prepared it. Then in your own way, share how excited you are that there's a space for everyone to celebrate their distinct dishes—this will provide a segue to the *presentation* portion of the event.

## Present.

This portion of the event is twofold: you can talk about the symbolic value of potlucks representing American religious diversity and you will give others the opportunity to present to the group about the dish they contributed. Does it trace back to their religion somehow? Does it express something about their culture or family? Why were they proud to bring it and share it with others? For example, *"I come from a big Italian Catholic family, and we always have spaghetti and meatballs for Christmas—I wanted to share that dish with everyone here since those are special memories that remind me of home when I'm feeling nostalgic being away from my family here at school."* As the leader, model a similar remark about your own dish so people have a clear idea of how they're meant to share.

In advance, be sure that your marketing for the potluck notes that folks will be encouraged to present about their dish and how it speaks to their identity.

## Share.

Once everyone has presented on how their dish speaks to who they are as a person, specifically related to their values, turn it back over to everyone to finish their meals and continue cultivating relationships with each other. The "share" here refers to your guests sharing the answers to some interfaith conversation prompts with one another. These can be projected on a screen for all to see, or they can be written on cards for each table. The prompts will provide an opportunity for interfaith dialogue that builds lasting relationships beyond the event (the kind of relationship that prompts you to actually pause and want to chat for a bit when you cross paths—not just the "smile and make eye contact while wondering if they remember that you were in the same freshmen orientation group" kind of relationship). You can design your own questions to accomplish this, but here are a few that we like:

- What stood out to you when you heard about the other dishes? What, from what they mentioned about their worldview, resonated with you?
- As you were preparing and then talking about your dish, what stories or values came up from your own worldview?
- If you had the opportunity to throw a dinner party with 5 people who you admire (living or dead, someone you know personally or not—sky's the limit!), who would you invite?
- If you could have a respectful and productive conversation with one person whose ideas challenge your thinking and values, who would it be and why?
- Talk about what values of yours that you are proud to see clearly reflected on campus. How are they connected to the stories or values you talked or heard about today?
- Where do you wish you saw the values of your institution reflected more? Where could your campus be doing a better job at diversity and pluralism?