

CREATING AN INTERFAITH ROOM OR SPACE ON CAMPUS

Embracing religious diversity on campus means accommodating the spiritual needs of students not only through staffing and programming, but also through architectural spaces that accommodate a variety of religious, spiritual, and ethical practices. Interfaith spaces are a visible symbol of an institution's commitment to welcoming religious diversity, and whether large or small can provide support to diverse students. Interfaith spaces communicate inclusivity, support of a religiously diverse student population, and foster a campus's commitment to pluralism. In addition, these spaces bring together religiously diverse students and value the spiritual practices of the student population. Finally, by being inclusive of non-religious students, the space can create an opportunity for students who do not identify with a particular tradition to find opportunities to gather and reflect.

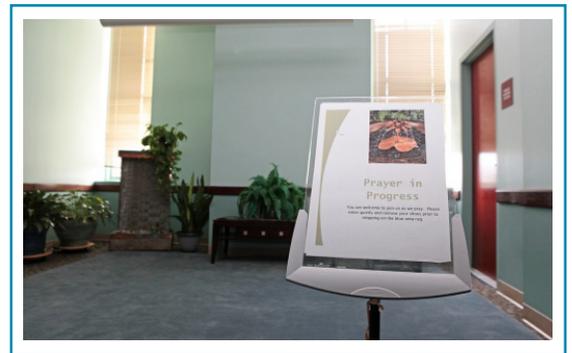
This resource will provide guidance for the establishment and design of an interfaith space on your campus. The document includes examples of excellent interfaith spaces, a frequently asked questions section that includes tips for creating your own space, and next steps for establishing a space on your campus.

EXAMPLES OF CAMPUS INTERFAITH SPACES

Union College, Schenectady, NY

BACKGROUND OF THE SPACE

After the President of Union College, Stephen Ainley, encountered Muslim students praying in the stairwells of a campus building, he felt a need for a space on campus that would accommodate the practices of religiously diverse students. President Ainley convened a committee to oversee the establishment of this space. A representative of each student religious and secular group, along with various staff members and chaplains at Union, sat on this committee to make decisions about the space. Because so many different parts of the campus were involved, it was essential to set a safe space where organizers listened to one another with respect. They worked together to interview religious and secular student groups to discover their needs and to make sure they were built into the room. In 2008, President Ainley opened and dedicated the space, saying it was the responsibility of everyone at Union to make sure everyone felt included. Now, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life is tasked with the general upkeep of the space.



DESCRIPTION

The interfaith space at Union College is purposefully simple. It is a former conference room turned sacred space. Because the room is meant to be a neutral space, it looks clean and uncluttered. The walls are a calm shade of blue; there are live plants in the room and a small water fountain. The furniture includes an armoire to house various items including books, prayer rugs, icons, meditation bells, and other items students might use for their practices. Other furniture includes a low table for students in case they need it for meditation, a carpet that rolls up in case students prefer not to take their shoes off when entering, and a large table for students to gather around for

group prayer. Most recently, two wash stations were added in the room for students who need to perform a ritual cleansing prior to their religious practice.

Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA

BACKGROUND OF THE SPACE: Elizabethtown College is a Church of the Brethren heritage school, and many of their values connect to fostering interfaith cooperation, such as cultivating peace, non-violence, valuing human dignity, and social justice. In order to encourage a strong culture of religious pluralism on campus, the administration at Elizabethtown College created a shared interfaith space for students of different religious backgrounds. Elizabethtown wanted the room to be consistently available so groups would not need to reserve a room each time they needed space. Because the interfaith room is a part of the Office of Religious Life, they were able to secure a space in one of the most visible parts of campus.

DESCRIPTION: The design for the room is quite simple. It is a former conference room, with one wall covered with a curtain so different religious traditions can hang symbols depending on their faith or spiritual practice. There are Tibetan chimes for those who want to meditate, pillows for people to sit on the floor, a kneeling bench for prayer off to the side of the room, and space for a resource library. Additional seats are in storage for when they are needed. Information on a variety of religious practices on campus is provided in the room.

Elon University, Elon, NC

BACKGROUND OF THE SPACE: Elon University was founded by the United Church of Christ, but is no longer officially affiliated with any tradition. It has a vibrant community of Christian students and a quickly growing Jewish student population. Having a unified space for students to come together to celebrate religious diversity became a priority for the campus, especially after 9/11. A decade-long vision of the university chaplain emeritus, coupled with the dedication of President Leo Lambert and generous benefactors, allowed the funding to create a new space for interfaith dialogue, religious observance, and encounter with religious diversity. In addition, stakeholders envision a center within the space for the academic exploration of religion, culture, and society. Now, the space, the [Numen Lumen Pavilion Multi-faith Center](#), is a vanguard example of multi-faith space at universities around the country.

DESCRIPTION: The Numen Lumen Pavilion is a two-story, centrally-located building on campus. The



first floor houses the chaplains' offices, a large meeting space, a sacred space blessed by members of the campus and surrounding community of different faiths, and a kosher kitchen. The sacred space is a circular room with large windows and a dome ceiling. It has a very simple design focused on natural light. There is no furniture, but if necessary, movable furniture can be brought into the room. There is a Zen garden outside of the first floor near the entrance. The second floor houses offices for affiliated Religious Life staff, two classrooms, a library, and two prayer rooms for student groups. All the bathrooms have washing stations. The space uses water and natural light for decoration, as well as several displays with artifacts and [artwork](#).

In addition to these examples, many other institutions have interfaith spaces on campus, including

the [University of North Florida](#), [Wellesley College](#), [Penn State](#), the [University of Chicago](#), and many others. As you think about the kind of interfaith space you want to create on your campus, consider doing your own research into campuses similar to yours to learn from their work.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

As you begin to think about creating an interfaith space on your campus, here are several common questions you may be wondering about.

WHAT MIGHT RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE STUDENTS NEED FROM AN INTERFAITH ROOM? HOW MIGHT DIFFERENT STUDENTS AND GROUPS USE THE ROOM?

These are just some basic examples of how different groups may observe their faith. If you are not sure what a certain group on your campus may need, the best way to find out is to just ask.

- ▶ Muslims pray five times a day. Prior to the prayer, or *Salah*, Muslims partake in ablution, or *Wudu*. The room should be near a bathroom to accommodate this or have a washroom in the room. Muslims often remove their shoes before prayer and require a clean space for prayer, so make sure the room has an empty space with clean carpets.
- ▶ Christians may want a place to kneel to perform prayers, as well as a shelf or desk to store crosses and holy books. Christian students may meet daily for a prayer or worship service.
- ▶ Jewish students may observe the Sabbath, or *Shabbat*, which begins Friday at sunset until Saturday at sunset. Students may want to commemorate the Sabbath with a Friday night meal. Some interfaith spaces may have a kitchen and dining area.
- ▶ Some Orthodox Jewish men and women separate during prayers. A portable divider will serve this purpose. Other religious groups may separate by gender as well. If you're not sure about the practices of the communities on your campus, just ask.
- ▶ For several Eastern traditions, it is important to have meditation items such as floor pillows, meditation bell, and a quiet room for reflection.
- ▶ Secular humanist and other non-religious ethical communities may use the space as a reflection room. This may simply require a quiet space.

WHAT ARE SOME SAMPLE GUIDELINES FOR USE OF THE ROOM?

- ▶ Check with your university fire marshal about the use of candles in the space. Many rituals involve the lighting of candles; if you are not able to use traditional candles, consider LED candles or other flameless options.
- ▶ Some campuses bring in food into their space for specific rituals, but avoid meats and alcohol which may make the space unclean for certain groups.
- ▶ If ablution (washing) stations are not an option, make sure the space is within short distance of a restroom.
- ▶ When deciding on design, it is best to exclude any images on the walls. Religious iconography or images that depict certain traditions could alienate those not included.
- ▶ Shoes should be removed prior to entering the space. Many campus rooms have included a shoe rack at the entrance. Certain traditions remove shoes prior to prayer in order to keep the space clean.
- ▶ There should be no animals in the space, as animals may violate guidelines for cleanliness in certain traditions.

- ▶ If specific groups will host weekly worship or meetings in the space, a sign-up calendar is important so you can make sure to accommodate different groups consistently. Have a clear policy in place for decision-making should two different groups want to use the space at the same time.
- ▶ Make sure your campus knows the space exists by hosting interfaith events in the space, posting fliers around campus, and letting the religious and secular groups know about the space every semester.

HOW CAN I GET STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE PLANNING?

Reach out to different religious and secular student organizations to gather information about their needs; convene students for focus groups and interviews. Involving students from the outset increases student use of the space by creating a vested interest in the success of the space.

WHAT ARE CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING THE SPACE?

Ensuring that the space has a regular budget to maintain it is essential to keeping the room beautiful and functional for students. Fairness in allocating use of the space between students of different traditions is important for communicating that the space is everyone. Design details of the space are important, especially since an interfaith space should be a neutral welcoming space.

SHOULD WE BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT INCLUDING THE NON-RELIGIOUS?

Yes. With one in three Americans under the age of 30 identifying broadly as ‘non-religious’ leaving the interfaith space solely for religious use will leave out a large number of students. Language around “reflection and meditation” should be included along with ‘prayer’ when advertising the space.

WHERE SHOULD THE SPACE BE ON CAMPUS?

A central location that will attract students from all over campus is important so that students are aware that the space exists and is open to all. Additionally, students are more likely to use the space if it is conveniently located near their classes and other meetings.

WHAT KIND OF FURNITURE SHOULD WE USE?

Furniture needs to be moveable, in order to accommodate different groups’ set up needs. Most spaces we know of have shelves for sacred texts and prayer rugs, shoe racks at the entrance of the room, and neutral, minimal decoration.

SHOULD MEETINGS BE ALLOWED IN THE ROOM?

For some campuses, the space is intended for spiritual practice and meetings are not allowed. Have this conversation with relevant stakeholders to find out what makes the most sense for your campus.

HOW MUCH SHOULD WE BUDGET FOR THE SPACE?

Many campuses have a budget for their space, determined by the type, location, and the office that oversees it. Each example above has a different group pay for creating the space – from the President’s Office, to Religious Life, to the Office of the Dean of Students. The conversations you have will determine your budget, and the budget should determine the type of space you pursue. Be sure to allocate a certain amount of money in your budget annually to maintain the space.

NEXT STEPS

Once you decide there should be an interfaith space on your campus, it is important to bring in stakeholders from across campus life to make the vision a reality. Different institutions have created their interfaith spaces in various ways, but we identified the process below based on conversations with several campuses.

Create a committee of students, faculty, and staff that are interested in this project. This committee should speak with a high-level leader like the President or the Dean of Students to seek administrative buy-in and support for this project. Use that meeting to articulate why the interfaith space speaks to the values, mission, and realities of religious diversity on your campus. Various members of this committee can volunteer to hold focus groups to answer questions about the probable users of the space, the location, design, budget, and more. These focus groups can help identify a central place on campus that will bring students together and other priorities for the space. The committee should then come back together and finalize the details based on the needs of the campus, and identify key leaders for implementation, a timeline and next steps for action.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ [Multi-faith and Religious Spaces on College and University Campuses](#). Karla Johnson and Peter Laurence.
- ▶ [The Multifaith Campus: Transforming Colleges and Universities for Spiritual Engagement](#). Dafina Lazarus Stewart, Michael M. Kocet, and Sharon Lobdell.
- ▶ [IFYC Interfaith Room Shared Use Guidelines](#). Interfaith Youth Core.
- ▶ [How to Establish a Prayer Room on Campus](#). Muslim Students' Association of the USA and Canada.
- ▶ [Beyond Tolerance: A Campus Religious Diversity Kit](#). NASPA & Education as Transformation.

Still have some questions? Get in touch with the Interfaith Youth Core to talk through your plans for creating a space (email info@ifyc.org). We can discuss the space with you and put you in touch with other campuses that went through the process.