



INTERFAITH COOPERATION AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: PROMISING PRACTICES

There are currently 8.2 million students enrolled at public universities in the United States, with the majority of college-educated Americans holding degrees from state-supported institutions.¹ A healthy interfaith culture at public universities is essential to building a nation of interfaith cooperation and understanding. The purpose of this resource is to provide information and recommendations to build interfaith work at public institutions of higher education. The strategies and practices in this resource are a good place to begin, and we hope you will share your continued learning and best practices with us along the way.

This resource is not meant as a ‘best practices’ resource, but a collection of promising practices, as interfaith programs at many public institutions are still emerging. Interfaith cooperation initiatives take many different forms at public universities, and professionals in the field are developing innovative approaches to interfaith work in state-supported institutions. If you are a professional or student at a public institution unsure of where to focus your interfaith efforts, the approaches in this document can hopefully provide you with some inspiration.

Interfaith at Public Schools 101

CHALLENGES: Interfaith work at public institutions presents a set of unique challenges. Public institutions are typically larger and more decentralized, making organizing for interfaith action on a wide scale more difficult. There are also limitations to the extent to which public institutions can endorse religious education and still maintain a separation of church and state. While religious education is different from interfaith cooperation, many lack the language to articulate why interfaith is “okay” on a public campus. Complex structures of organization and reporting can also make “cutting through the red tape” of organizing an interfaith presence a challenge.

STRENGTHS: While limitations do exist, there are many opportunities available at public universities. State schools often have high levels of diversity within their student, staff, and faculty populations – including religious and worldview diversity. Building a culture of religious pluralism is dependent on the intentional engagement of different religious and secular identities, and the diversity of public universities is arguably their greatest asset. In addition, public institutions often have some formal commitment to diversity, global citizenship, and service to the community within their missions. Land Grant institutions in particular draw upon a history of service to their region, and hold relationships with philanthropic and service organizations. Religious and intentionally secular student organizations can also provide avenues for collaboration around community service and shared values.

PROMISING STRATEGIES: There are robust interfaith initiatives happening at a number of public universities, each with a unique approach. The following are examples of the approaches a few institutions have taken to build interfaith cooperation on their campuses.

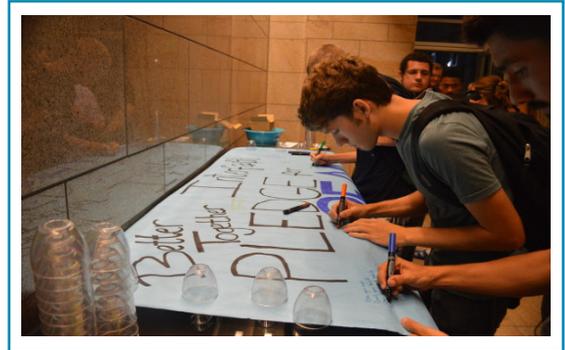
¹ National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>

STRATEGY 1: BUILD STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF INTERFAITH INITIATIVES

It takes the right combination of challenge and support to let students lead the way, and the good fortune to find the right student leaders. Students leading interfaith activities keep the focus of programs appropriate to the interests and concerns of their peers and indicate to campus administrators that interfaith cooperation is a priority of the student body.

University of North Florida (UNF), Jacksonville, FL

Under the guidance of staff, an enthusiastic student leader organized a cohort of around twenty students to begin meeting regularly to plan interfaith activities through [UNF's Interfaith Center](#). Students overseeing UNF's [Better Together campaign](#) run service projects aimed to raise awareness of hunger on campus, and also partner with outside organizations to combat human trafficking in the Jacksonville area. In addition, regular "Coffee and Conversation" gatherings, and a visible [social media](#) presence, link the Interfaith Center's activities to the overall campus.



Watch a case study of UNF's interfaith work: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaKvmKBYc-s>

STRATEGY 2: DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Local houses of worship and religious organizations are valuable avenues for interfaith service activity. Capitalizing on the relationships you or your institution already have conserves resources and cultivates support for interfaith service. Interfaith groups under the umbrella of faith-based organizations should take extra care to be welcoming to those of any or no faith, in order to cultivate an inclusive space for interfaith engagement.

University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA

Since the University of Iowa lacks university staff dedicated to religious life, students organize out of the Wesley Center (Christian, United Methodist) with strong support of the campus Hillel Center (Jewish). Affiliated campus religious life staff who wanted to start an [Interfaith Service Group](#) sent a group of students to an [Interfaith Leadership Institute \(ILI\)](#) to build student investment. With dedicated staff support from the Wesley Center and a recently identified faculty ally, support is building for interfaith cooperation on campus. While campus ministers are not employed by the university, they have a vested interest in students' spiritual development, and can often point to resources like space for meetings and funding for events.

STRATEGY 3: INTEGRATE INTERFAITH INTO COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAMS

Public institutions usually have substantial service-learning offices and/or programs that can incorporate interfaith reflections and dialogue during service projects. Motivations for service are often rooted in students' religious and ethical values, and service-learning activities are a natural place to begin exploring topics of shared values. In 2009, President Barack Obama issued a challenge to American colleges and universities to work together across lines of religious difference for the common good. The [President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge](#) is an avenue through which many public institutions engage in interfaith service. A government-sponsored program helps to support accurate understanding of interfaith activities—as educational, not promoting a particular religion.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL

At the University of Illinois, the Office of Public Engagement, Diversity, and Equity and the Office of Inclusion collaborate to oversee U of I's President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge projects. In addition, U of I boasts a diverse group of vibrant religious communities including the Newman Center, Hillel, and Wesley Center, and calls upon its diversity to organize an annual conference for interfaith cooperation, the [Illinois Interfaith Conference \(IIC\)](#). Interfaith leaders at U of I collaborated with the Religious Workers Association (RWA) to plan the inaugural gathering in 2011. Fostering collaborative partnerships with both internal and external organizations has been helpful for building bases of support for interfaith work.

STRATEGY 4: INCORPORATE INTERFAITH INTO YOUR ROLE ON CAMPUS

It is rare for professionals at public institutions to hold full-time positions dedicated to interfaith cooperation. However, many allies will find ways to support interfaith efforts within the roles that they already hold on campus. Advising student organizations, guiding undergraduate research, or incorporating interfaith elements into programs they oversee are just a few examples of approaches allies are taking in their work.

University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA

The UC Irvine [XIV Dalai Lama Scholars program](#) provides scholarships to exceptional undergraduates who design and launch ambitious “compassion-in-action” projects aimed at increasing awareness about ethics, compassionate leadership, local and global responsibility, and/or peace. The scholarship, established with the blessing of His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama, supports students interested in reaching across lines of differences and designing service programs for different types of communities, whether locally or globally, which aligns naturally with the goals of interfaith cooperation. When considering students for scholarships, strong consideration goes to applicants focused on promoting cooperation across religious difference.

STRATEGY 5: ENGAGE INTERFAITH THROUGH ACADEMICS

Scholars whose areas of expertise or personal story connect them to interfaith can consider integrating a module or class on interfaith cooperation into their course offerings. Other academics sponsor opportunities for undergraduate research and internships around interfaith studies. Increasing students' appreciative knowledge of other traditions and raising awareness of the history of interfaith cooperation can raise interest in more service-based activities in other areas of campus life.

University of Toledo, Toledo, OH

The [Center for Religious Understanding](#), headed by Dr. Jeanine Diller, bridges the academic and student life sides of interfaith cooperation. Dialogues, forums, “Faith Matters” TV series discussions, and community service activities provide the opportunity to engage with interfaith cooperation intellectually as well as interpersonally. The Center sits within the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, with student interns helping to research and plan the various opportunities sponsored by the Center. The Center also capitalizes on the diversity of Toledo as a reflection of the United States overall through active engagement with the surrounding community.

GETTING STARTED - TIPS FROM THE FIELD

DO A 'TEMPERATURE CHECK' OF YOUR INSTITUTION. Meet with decision-makers on your campus to gauge the level of support you will receive for interfaith cooperation. If you get the impression that certain areas of campus are better suited to focus your efforts, start there. Be prepared to talk about how interfaith cooperation is needed at your institution.

ARTICULATE WHY INTERFAITH MATTERS. Interfaith cooperation is values-based service on issues of common concern, and is ultimately about civic and interpersonal engagement, not promoting one religion or another. It includes people of all religious, spiritual, and non-religious identities and holds no perspective above any other. Colleges and universities – both public and private – aim to graduate alumni who are able to connect the knowledge they've attained through their education to contribute in a diverse society. Educating citizens of a diverse democracy includes creating purposeful and respectful encounters between those of different religious and secular identities.

SEARCH FOR STUDENT LEADERS. Student-driven strategies are often the most powerful on public campuses. Rachael McNeal, Interfaith Center Coordinator at the University of North Florida, said it best when pointing out that “students are likely to listen to other students.” Start by reaching out to different religious and secular student groups to look for interested students. Faculty and staff colleagues may also be able to provide suggestions.



Interfaith organizers at the University of Tampa

START WITH SERVICE. Determine if your institution participates in the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. This is an indication of administrative support for interfaith service, as the presidents of institutions are required to approve participation in the Challenge. Staff in offices of civic engagement are often leads for Challenge initiatives at public institutions.

FIND DATA TO REFERENCE. Do you know how many Hindus or Secular Humanists are at your institution? Are there prayer rooms for Muslim students? How many Christian students frequently attend services? Contact your university's Office of Institutional Research for information about previous administrations of CIRP or NSSE. Being able to point to students' needs on campus will help you make the case for interfaith cooperation.

IDENTIFY FACULTY AND STAFF ALLIES. Chances are there are other people interested in supporting interfaith work. Faculty in religious studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, social work, and health services may be possibilities and staff in diversity and inclusion initiatives, leadership programs, and service learning may be as well.

TRY TO AVOID REINVENTING THE WHEEL. If there is already great work happening on your campus around identity and diversity, interfaith cooperation could fit well with the goals of existing programs. Set up conversations with the heads of existing initiatives, and look for ways you can contribute to their goals while advocating for interfaith cooperation. For more information about making it interfaith, [click here](#).

STAY CONNECTED. Administrators, faculty, and staff at public institutions are an important source of information and support. Sign up for [IFYC's Higher Education newsletter](#), join the Interfaith Allies in [Higher Education Facebook Page](#), and follow interfaith leaders in the field on Twitter to continue the conversation. Also, attending an [Interfaith Leadership Institute](#) is a great way to build your skills as an interfaith ally.

If you've had great success with something not mentioned in this resource, be touch with IFYC to tell us what you're up to. For more tips, check out our growing library of educational [resources](#). There are also IFYC staff available to support you around your interfaith activities. Contact us at info@ifyc.org to get connected.

