

Building a Campus Movement of Interfaith Cooperation: Interfaith Youth Core in Action

By Mary Ellen Giess and Eboo Patel

Developing awareness of and action around interfaith cooperation within our institutional cultures is a core mechanism for increasing spiritual capital on our campuses. Giess and Patel share how the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) partners with individual campuses to help create vision and a campus ecology of interfaith cooperation in order to impact student and campus outcomes, increasing spiritual capital within higher education.

Rachel and Nadeem met at Wesleyan University in 2008. Rachel, a young woman from upstate New York, grew up acutely aware of her minority identity as a Jew. After her first visit to Israel, all she knew was that she had to get back there – with kosher restaurants and Hebrew spoken all around her, she finally understood what it meant to belong. When she returned to Israel on a Muslim-Jewish dialogue trip during her first year at Wesleyan, she experienced another side of Israel. As she entered East Jerusalem, the Hebrew faded and was replaced with Arabic, hijabs became more prevalent than yarmulkes, and Rachel began to feel nervous – that is, until her Muslim friend turned to her and said, “I see a lot of women in hijabs. That makes me feel safe” (Berkowitz, 2009).

Nadeem, a Muslim from New Hampshire, came to Wesleyan with a hunger for interfaith work. Deeply committed to his own Muslim identity, Nadeem believed that people are able to grow and strengthen their own religious beliefs through dialogue with others. He sought a community of students who were similarly invested in their own traditions, but shared his desire for dialogue and action; yet he was disappointed to find an inactive interfaith community at Wesleyan. Driven by his vision of interfaith cooperation and dialogue, Nadeem developed his own action campaign – an interfaith Fast-a-Thon – during the month of Ramadan. Nadeem recruited approximately 250 students to join him in fasting for a day and donating the cost of their meals to local charities (Kerr, 2009).

Fueled by her experience in the Middle East, Rachel took part in Nadeem's Fast-a-Thon, and saw for the first time the connection between interfaith dialogue and interfaith action. She realized that there were, in fact, shared values that connected her Jewish identity with Nadeem's Muslim identity. She experienced a different sense of belonging, one forged by a common goal. The following year, Rachel and Nadeem put their resources and shared vision together to plan a second Fast-a-Thon. The event was co-sponsored by the Muslim Students Alliance, the University Chaplains, the Office of Community Service, the Student Budgetary Committee, and Student Activities and Leadership Development, bringing together over a quarter of their campus community to raise more than \$11,000 for local food charities.

Interfaith Youth Core as a Mechanism for Enhancing Spiritual Capital

Through their interfaith work on campus, Rachel and Nadeem each strengthened their personal religious identity and had an opportunity to act on the powerful values of their religious beliefs. But their collaboration had a significance that extended beyond even their own experiences; Rachel and Nadeem transformed Wesleyan as an *institution*. By building new relationships and taking collective action, Rachel and Nadeem re-defined interfaith cooperation within the campus culture at Wesleyan. In this sense, the story of Rachel and Nadeem is a story of the interaction between spiritual capital and social capital: Their work built spiritual capital – putting vision, values, and higher purpose into real-life practice (Sado, 2009) – while they built social capital – forging networks and relationships that had a productive and tangible value in their community (Putnam, 2000).

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) seeks to make interfaith cooperation a social norm – a world where individuals have positive relationships across the lines of faith and an appreciative understanding of the diverse traditions in our society. As demonstrated by Rachel and Nadeem, this movement depends on both individual and institutional transformation. Success is not possible without individuals dedicated to the interfaith youth movement, but it also requires institutions to have a *vision for change*. IFYC's work on campuses across the United States provides a framework to proactively integrate spiritual capital and social capital to transform individuals and institutions. By augmenting spiritual capital and social capital on campus, institutions of higher education can effectively build campus-wide interfaith movements.

IFYC on Campus

Interfaith Youth Core focuses its work on college campuses for a number of reasons. According to Harvard professor Diana Eck, America is the most religiously diverse country in the world and the most religiously devout country in the West (Eck, 2001). Nowhere is this fact more apparent than on college campuses that bring together students, staff, and faculty who possess different cultures, backgrounds, and faith practices.

While institutions of higher education have done much to address other important identity issues, including race, gender, and sexuality, religious identity remains largely undiscussed. IFYC believes that if institutions of higher education engage religious diversity with the same seriousness and resources dedicated to other social identity issues, the results could manifest themselves not only within higher education, but also across American society and the world (Patel, 2007).

Moreover, college campuses have been at the vanguard of social change movements around other areas of identity – from leading civil rights protests to gender equity campaigns. By transforming the next generation of leaders on campus, interfaith cooperation in higher education could mean interfaith cooperation in *society*. In short, if interfaith cooperation becomes a social norm within higher education then we are one step closer to making interfaith cooperation a social norm in our larger communities and global society.

IFYC has developed a framework through which institutions can begin to build interfaith cooperation on and around their campuses. This framework provides a model to build both social capital and spiritual capital on campus, and consists of an institutional *vision* and a supporting campus-wide *ecology* to make interfaith cooperation a campus norm. However, the truly successful interfaith programs will be marked by measurable outcomes that will evaluate the actual progress of building an interfaith movement on campus. Therefore, evaluation of programs through surveying students, faculty and staff before and after IFYC program delivery is a crucial hallmark of an IFYC engagement.

All of our work on campus utilizes our existing definition of religious pluralism (Patel and Meyer, 2010), our methodology of storytelling, shared values, and service-learning (Patel, Kunze, and Silverman, 2008), and our strategy of building interfaith leaders (Patel and Meyer, 2009).

Vision

Institutions of higher education need a clear vision of interfaith work on campus that explains their motivations for engaging in the issue. The importance of a strong vision cannot be understated – it is the institutional articulation of the importance of religious pluralism on campus. Furthermore, the articulation of this vision is the key to making interfaith cooperation a social norm on campus. Institutions demonstrate their vision on three levels: urgency, relevance, and excellence.

Urgency: Why now?

A core component of an institutional vision is the understanding that religious diversity is a critical issue in the world today. The religious landscape of America has changed dramatically over the past half-century; we now live in a society of approximately six million Jews, between three and four million Buddhists, nearly half a million Hindus, and as many as six million Muslims (Eck, 2009). Additionally, our world is marked by global religious conflict, and the religious communities in America are reflective of the religious communities in conflict around the world. This means that the violence in Baghdad,

Bombay, and Belfast have serious repercussions in American cities. In an increasingly globalized world, these conflicts are playing out on our television screens and in our communities virtually simultaneously.

Americans largely lack significant knowledge about other religions, or “religious literacy,” which means that we are more diverse than ever, but also know less about each other than ever (Prothero, 2007). This lack of religious literacy has serious implications for relationships across communities. Research indicates that the more we know about each other, the less likely we are to hold biases against one another and be in conflict with one another (Pew Forum, 2009). These four factors – growing religious diversity, religious conflict, religious literacy, and religious bigotry – clearly demonstrate that religious diversity is a critical issue that deserves immediate attention from institutions of higher education.

Relevance: Why this campus?

Even if campuses recognize that religious diversity is a pressing global issue, it still must be brought into conversation with existing institutional values and mission. Institutions must articulate an urgent rationale for addressing religious diversity that resonates with their own mission and values. Why should a religious institution care about religious pluralism? How do the skills of building religious pluralism connect to education for global citizenship? To what extent should knowledge about religious belief be included in the highest standard of education today?

These sorts of institutional values – the very core of what an educational institution strives to be and cultivate in its students – are precisely in line with building religious pluralism. In fact, many of them demand it! A strong vision of building interfaith cooperation on campus must articulate the importance of that mission to that institution. Furthermore, this kind of institutional discernment process is a key contribution to institution-wide spiritual capital.

Excellence: What is success?

The final component of a strong vision for interfaith cooperation on campus is a clear understanding of what marks successful programming. Without a sense of what success looks like, it would be easy to lose sight of the fact that higher education serves as the vanguard institution to set a societal standard of interfaith cooperation. With this in mind, building an interfaith movement on campus should consist of campus-wide programs of the highest caliber with connection to a larger vision for success. This is a cutting edge vision for interfaith programming on campus with serious implications. This standard of excellence demands that large numbers of campus-wide stakeholders get involved – students, all sectors of campus staff, faculty, administration – to build a movement toward a tipping point of change. Much like multicultural programming spans campus (including academics, student diversity programs and trainings, administrative commitment, etc.), so does an excellent interfaith program.

However, there is an additional key feature of successful interfaith work on campus – measurable outcomes. This brings us to a very important question: what steps should a campus take to make this vision for interfaith work a reality?

Campus Ecology

A successful interfaith movement on campus pairs a campus-wide vision for interfaith work with a strong campus ecology that supports the vision. Each campus environment is a unique system of relationships, an “ecology,” that are implicated in a campus-wide interfaith movement. IFYC utilizes a systematic and analytical approach to understanding campus ecology, with the very specific goal of driving measurable student and campus outcomes.

Let’s imagine campus ecology as a house. The house as a whole represents the entire campus, but within the house there are multiple floors and multiple rooms within each floor. Each floor represents a layer of campus ecology: students, staff, faculty, and administration. Yet each layer of ecology can be broken down further to understand its constituent parts.

On the student floor, there are individual rooms: religious student organizations, service-learning student organizations, resident advisors, orientation leaders, student government, student diversity committee, etc. Similarly on the staff floor, there are individual rooms: housing, diversity affairs, new student programs, religious life, service-learning staff, communications, admissions, etc. On the faculty floor, there are individual departments, interdisciplinary research programs, and specific academic programs (such as First Year Seminars, etc.). Finally, there is the administration, with individual rooms of their own – the President or Chancellor, the Board of Trustees, the President’s Cabinet, etc. Each floor of the house brings its own assets, or social capital, which can be utilized in building a campus-wide interfaith movement.

Breaking down a campus ecology in this way helps give us a visual for advancing interfaith programming on campus in order to develop spiritual capital within our higher education institutions. This planning process is essentially designing a campus ecology that will sustain an interfaith movement on campus. Each part of the campus ecology should be examined to determine how it can support interfaith work on campus; to do so, consider what social and spiritual capital is already available and what interfaith programs can be implemented within the existing context.

For example, if residence advisors already receive diversity training, then religious diversity training should be added to their roster. Additionally, service-learning and leadership development staff should be training in the skills they need to incorporate interfaith reflection into their existing initiatives. The President should incorporate messaging about the importance of religious pluralism into existing speeches or programs about the values of the institution. Each individual layer of the campus ecology has social capital to leverage to make interfaith cooperation a social norm on campus, which has the further result of enhancing spiritual capital.

It is important to note that a campus vision and a campus ecology are mutually reinforcing supports to drive measurable outcomes. Spiritual capital and social capital drive both vision and ecology. A campus vision cannot exist without the ecological support mechanisms that make the vision a reality. Likewise, while ecological structures that support religious pluralism can be put into place, if there is no sense of urgency, relevance, or excellence for those structures, they will ultimately have little impact on the campus climate. These two components together drive measurable change on campus; one without the other can potentially make little difference.

Student Outcomes

A vision and an ecology that support interfaith cooperation should not exist without gauging their success; there must be measurable outcomes that indicate that social capital and spiritual capital are working together to build a campus interfaith movement. Measurable outcomes can be produced on two levels: the student level and the campus level. “Success” on the student level, then, can be quantified by simple evaluative mechanisms that look at the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of the student body and how they change over time. These quantitative results help institutions discern where to focus their resources by clearly delineating successful programming from unsuccessful programming. Campuses can also measure the increase in spiritual and social capital within the student body. There are two areas in which to measure the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of students on campus – the student body as a whole and targeted interfaith leaders.

Student Body as a Whole

Building interfaith cooperation as a social norm on campus means that interfaith programs should aim to move the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of the entire student body about religious pluralism. Students should have knowledge of what religious pluralism is and why it is important in the world today. Students should have a baseline of information about other religious beliefs and know how to engage respectfully with those of religiously diverse backgrounds. Student should have relationships with others of religiously diverse backgrounds and participate in initiatives on campus that lead towards strengthening community. In building capacity in each area, students are actively augmenting their spiritual and social capital. Each of these categories is easily measured through student surveys, and interfaith programs on campus should be designed to achieve these goals.

Interfaith Student Leaders

While the outcomes articulated above apply to the entire student population on campus, IFYC particularly focuses on cultivating interfaith leaders who will become actively involved in driving these results. The attitudes, behaviors and knowledge required are heightened for successful interfaith leadership. Not only should interfaith leaders know about religious pluralism, but they should also actively spread the message of religious pluralism themselves.

Interfaith leaders also need basic information about religious diversity, while using this knowledge to educate others and to stand up against religious bigotry. Like all students, interfaith leaders should have relationships with others of diverse backgrounds, and should use those relationships to mediate conflict between groups or organize action projects that build religious pluralism on campus. In sum, IFYC cultivates attitudes and knowledge for interfaith leaders for the express purpose of producing unique and exemplary behaviors that substantively contribute to making interfaith cooperation a social norm on campus (Patel and Meyer, 2009).

Campus Outcomes

Sustainable campus success cannot rely on student outcomes alone. Certain programs may successfully change the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of a subset of students without effectively establishing interfaith cooperation as a social norm on campus. Therefore, campuses should seek outcomes that mark successful, long-term interfaith programming on campus. These outcomes tell institutions when their campus-wide vision is actually being implemented. There are types of campus outcomes to be measured by surveying students, faculty and staff: campus climate and campus programs.

Campus Climate

Institutions regularly utilize campus climate surveys to gauge student, faculty and staff comfort levels on campus. This particular measurement of campus climate maps easily onto the existing field in that the surveys should demonstrate that students, faculty and staff feel comfortable expressing their religious or philosophical identity on campus. However, there is one additional dimension to this approach to campus climate: IFYC seeks to know if the campus population perceives that the institution is cultivating a *value* of religious pluralism. For example, on many campuses, any student would say that “diversity” or “service” is a value that the institution actively cultivates. Therefore, IFYC expressly asks if stakeholders perceive religious pluralism as a campus value. Survey results will indicate the strength or weakness associated with this value on campus.

Campus Programs

The campus program outcome is a close look at the purpose and reach of interfaith programs on campus. Interfaith programs should be implemented based on an understanding of the campus ecology. Therefore, certain programs can be considered hallmarks of exemplary engagement of religious diversity on campus. Furthermore, these hallmark programs exist on each “floor” of the campus house. Student staff should receive religious diversity trainings along with other diversity training, and an interfaith student council should be equipped to build religious pluralism across campus. Staff should receive capacity building trainings that leverage their expertise in diversity to address religious diversity, as well. Faculty should develop interfaith courses and concentrations to study religious pluralism in the classroom. High-level administration provides institutional messaging and budgets to support each of these initiatives. While the above list is not exhaustive, it provides a sample of campus programs that can easily chart a campus’s commitment to interfaith cooperation.

Institutional Partnership to Build Social and Spiritual Capital

The issue of religious diversity on campus has never been more relevant. Last spring, a national campaign called “Everyone Draw Muhammad Day” cropped up on campuses across the country. Protesting the television show *South Park*’s censorship of an episode featuring Muhammad in a bear suit, atheist and agnostic student groups took action on their campuses by drawing stick figures of Muhammad in prominent places on campus, like the quad. These students adamantly proclaimed that they were standing up for free speech, yet Muslim students on campus had a very different response to the situation. Muslim communities were effectively marginalized within the campus community, and backlash against the atheist student groups resulted in reciprocal marginalization.

This issue is not just about free speech. It is about the values that an institution holds and the actions it will take to protect these values. When racially or ethnically charged incidents occur on campus, institutional stakeholders should not hesitate to take immediate action. Issuing statements, planning educational programming, and hosting dialogues are common campus reactions. Yet on “Everyone Draw Muhammad Day,” aside from a few notable exceptions, many institutions remained silent. Who stands up to defend the value of religious pluralism on campus? Who equips the atheist and Muslim students to take action, or speak respectfully with one another? Who has a vision for the way a campus should engage religious diversity?

IFYC partners with institutions of higher education to build a campus-wide interfaith movement that both proactively prevents and constructively reacts to flashpoint issues around religious diversity on campus. Relying on the above framework, IFYC works with campuses to articulate a vision and build an ecology that drives campus change. Institutions of higher education have the opportunity to support their students through incidents such as this, augmenting both the social and spiritual capital available on campus, and effectively mobilizing a generation of young people dedicated to building religious pluralism.

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