Many campus professionals are veterans at running exceptional student programs but brand new to organizing interfaith programming. Because of the sensitive nature of religious identity, interfaith work 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 “What if I offend someone because I don’t say the right thing?” However, the good news is that many of the skills you already use to foster student leadership and development and to run excellent programming are translatable to interfaith cooperation.

This 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. Use this tool to add interfaith to service learning events, residence life programming, and other co-curricular events you already run.

**WHAT IS INTERFAITH COOPERATION?**

Before jumping in, it may be helpful to define “interfaith cooperation.” Harvard scholar Diana Eck points out that “diversity” in and of itself is a neutral and descriptive term. 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 to be in relationship with one another and willing to work together. 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 already involve religiously diverse students working together; this tool will help you open up opportunities for intentional interfaith conversation, engagement, and action.

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 and builds foundation for tackling future, difficult dialogues. 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.

**STEP ONE: INTERFAITH PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES**

The first step in creating intentional interfaith programming is to make sure that the programming offers a 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 and beliefs to ensure participation in
a particular event you are planning. If you do not know – or even if you think you do – it never hurts to reach out to diverse groups and ask how your programming can be more inclusive. 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.

To Consider - Make it Interfaith Friendly:

- **IS IT DIVISIVE?** Is your activity or program inclusive of a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives? Or might it be divisive? If your event focuses on a hot-button issue, it doesn’t mean it’s not valuable; it just means it may not be the best way to start building interfaith relationships.

- **LANGUAGE:** Think about how you frame and talk about your programs. How are you advertising your events? Is it clear that all religious and non-religious identities are invited? Will students know what you mean by “interfaith?” Make sure you reach out to a range of groups – from evangelicals to atheists – to help them understand why you want them to feel included in your event.

- **TIMING:** 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.

- **RELIGIOUS PRACTICE:** Now think about your event itself – will participants be able to practice their faith comfortably while participating? Take into consideration food observances for participants and having time allowed for prayer observances. For example, if the timing of the event overlaps with one of the daily prayers that Muslim students observe, you may need to create a break in the schedule.

If you’re not sure how to help different groups feel included, just ask. It’s not your job to know every detail of every religious or ethical tradition, but it is important that you take the time to hear about the concerns and needs of the community you’re planning to involve.

More Resources

Check out our [Interfaith Friendly](#) guide for more ideas on making your events inclusive.

**STEP TWO: CREATING A SAFE SPACE**

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 a service event or educational programming, as such programs often inherently build relationships and set safe space amongst participants. As we mentioned, having this kind of conversation may be new and even a bit intimidating 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.
**To Consider - Safe Space Guidelines:**

- 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.

- Agree to disagree: We do not have to come to the same conclusion on everything, and there is 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, seek opportunities to voice 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 way to explore meaningful values and motivations, ensuring students speak from their own experiences rather than having to speak on behalf of their whole religious tradition. They also help evoke the experiences of other listeners – one student’s story can inspire many other narratives.

Think of programming that you already run that contains elements of storytelling or meaning-making. Look for opportunities within those programs to integrate discussions of values inspired by religious and non-religious identities. Programming that addresses personal reflection or student leadership would be a natural fit for these activities. Retreats and student development groups are also excellent forums for this type of storytelling.

**To Consider - Facilitation Tips:**

- Your role here is more of a facilitator; as such, you should offer prompts and draw connections in the conversation, encouraging students to drive the discussion and engage with each other’s experiences.

- 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?

- 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.

More Resources

Check out our Shared Values Facilitation Guide for more ideas for leading a reflective conversation about shared values.

STEP FOUR: PROMPTS FOR INTERFAITH CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

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 activity or group project, you also have regular opportunities to engage students in more informal conversation and reflection. Gathering together after a day working at a shelter, volunteering at a school, or even after a significant tabling event gives groups the chance to share their thoughts on their work and reflect on what motivated them to originally get involved.

Many of the prompts below can be used to facilitate both formal and informal conversations.

To Consider - Prompts for Conversation and Reflection:

- 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 the story of one person from your religious or non-religious tradition or background that inspired you to get involved in interfaith action.

- Share one experience where you saw the power of working together around shared values. What values do you think you share with people of other religious and non-religious identities?

- How did today’s experience change the way you think about your relationships with people of other religious and non-religious identities?

- 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**

This toolkit offers a few first steps to take for integrating interfaith action into existing programming on a campus. Here are some further resources and programs if you are interested in learning more about interfaith work on a college campus:

- **BETTER TOGETHER:** IFYC’s student-led Better Together campaign focuses on bringing students together, from different religious and non-religious backgrounds, around an issue important to their campus and community. Learn more and sign up here: [http://www.ifyc.org/better-together](http://www.ifyc.org/better-together)

- **INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTES:** ILIs train participants to be interfaith leaders who build relationships across identities, tell powerful stories to bridge divides, and mobilize their campuses through interfaith projects. Find out more about the ILIs—open to students, staff, and faculty—here: [http://www.ifyc.org/ili](http://www.ifyc.org/ili)

- **STAFF AND FACULTY RESOURCES:** IFYC has created different resources for staff and faculty on campus, including case studies, rubrics, and toolkits. Our collection of downloadable campus resources are available here: [http://www.ifyc.org/teaching-interfaith](http://www.ifyc.org/teaching-interfaith)

- **BE IN TOUCH:** IFYC has dedicated staff who work with campuses to think about interfaith programming on campus. Email [info@ifyc.org](mailto:info@ifyc.org) to be put in touch with one of our staff.