

Interfaith Programs on College Campuses: Lessons Learned

Overview

From 2005-2009, five U.S. universities partnered together to develop and implement programs and projects on their campuses designed to improve relationships among students from different faith traditions. With support from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of University Programs, efforts involved in this program ranged from community service projects to academic courses on religious pluralism to retreats to seminar series to art projects. The participating schools—University of Maryland, Tufts University, Brandeis University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Wellesley College—were a diverse set of institutions, each with its own campus culture, demographics, and traditions, and each pursued programming believed to be most appropriate and relevant to its students and campus. All five schools agreed to engage in a common evaluation of their programs, generating important lessons learned for all schools seeking to launch or enhance interfaith programs based on feedback from participating students and from program directors.

Lessons Learned

Successes

- Student participants across the campuses found this programming to be successful in:
 - creating positive interfaith contact, interaction, and friendships,
 - increasing interfaith understanding and tolerance,
 - increasing knowledge about different faiths, and
 - generating interfaith activities involving the wider campus/community,
- A number of students noted that the interfaith programs resulted in their talking to, learning from, and becoming friends with students from religious backgrounds different from their own and who they would have been unlikely to meet and get to know otherwise.
- Each campus offered on-going activities over the course of multiple years, which helped foster relationship building among participants.¹ Even after initial grant funding ended, student engagement continued on each campus, as demonstrated by the development of Tufts new Conversation Action Faith Education (CAFÉ) program.
- Programs can overcome the challenge of potentially engaging only students predisposed to be interested in interfaith work by including in its programming a specific student-led outreach component.

¹ This initiative did not allow for insights on the impacts of shorter-term efforts.

Challenges

- While it is imperative that the leadership of a program reflect a diversity of faiths, it can be difficult to recruit both leaders and participants from multiple faith backgrounds to the programs. Perceived over-representation (or under-representation) of a faith group in the activity can lead to mistrust or alienation of some participants. To help ensure a successful program, significant attention should be paid to the recruitment process, with efforts made to tap into existing networks on campus with diverse membership.
- If it is a goal of the program to explore contentious issues between and among different faiths, the programming needs to address these issues directly. Creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to work together, dialogue, and form friendships is an important step, but tackling substantive interfaith issues and dilemmas requires programming dedicated to such topics.

Background

The five-campus project, known as *Campus Dialogues—Changing Attitudes across Religious Communities: Developing Models for College Campuses*, was supported by START as part of its efforts related to improving understanding of how different communities in the United States respond to and perceive terrorist threats and to fostering community resilience. The project was directed by **Dr. Jeffrey Summit** (*Tufts University*) and **Dr. Jonathan Wilkenfeld** (*University of Maryland*) and involved a leadership team at each campus. Program evaluation, involving the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys and interviews, was conducted by Dr. Ifat Maoz, an expert in intergroup relations (at University of Pennsylvania during the project; now at Hebrew University of Jerusalem). The leaders of the 5 campuses met regularly during this period to discuss progress and challenges with programs, and students and leaders from the five campuses conducted a day-long conference in Boston on *Religious Pluralism at a Time of Extremism*, attracting more than 100 attendees. Additional information and materials on programs at each of the campuses is available from the project directors and from START.

Project Directors

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The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terror (START) is a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence, tasked by the Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate with using state-of-the-art theories, methods, and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics, and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. START, based at the University of Maryland, College Park, aims to provide timely guidance on how to disrupt terrorist networks, reduce the incidence of terrorism, and enhance the resilience of U.S. society in the face of the terrorist threat.

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