

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Building interfaith understanding on campus

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Interfaith cooperation on college and university campuses is so important nowadays, perhaps now more than ever. Given the current political climate, you probably have heard (or taken part in) arguments or discussions about different religious traditions and cultures. You probably have seen some form of discrimination as well. We face a pressing need to focus on constructive and positive interaction between religious traditions, combatting bias, negativity and stereotypes.

Faith traditions, spiritualities and world views play a large role in communities and on college campuses, whether private or secular. These traditions, and their respective communities, help students to navigate their new identity in a time of major growth and development. It is especially important for college students to practice interfaith dialogue and cooperation precisely because college is a life-changing time, one in which growing minds are formed and new ideas take root. Students likely are in a new place, learning new things and meeting new people — they are exploring their own journeys and deepening their own identities.

Thinking back to my roots, I came from a small town predominantly made up of Catholic and evangelical Christians. There was one Sikh family in that small community. Sadly, they received a number of threats for just living in our town. Even outside of

church, it was assumed that Christianity was the only form of truth, and all other religions were heretical. At that time, I did not know enough about other traditions to argue or question.

When I attended my undergraduate college, I encountered far more diversity than I had ever experienced at home. I no longer was surrounded by a predominantly white Christian community. Out of curiosity, I took a few religious studies classes, and in doing so created personal relationships with those who embraced different faiths and spiritualities.

In learning about other traditions, I ended up discovering and deepening my own spirituality. Through these relationships, I was able to engage in open dialogue about the best and worst aspects of our respective traditions. In those spaces, I learned how to facilitate interfaith dialogue, and I came to terms with my spirituality, which plays a huge role in who I am today.

HESITANCY TO CHANGE

During that time in college, I was a resident assistant. I saw my fair share of discrimination toward those who believed in

other faiths and spiritualities. After my religious studies classes, I was inspired to create programs that promoted interfaith dialogue and religious literacy. Unfortunately, my supervisors were hesitant. They did not want the residents to be offended by the material, in case they thought I would be proselytizing them. My campus was diverse, yet there was little opportunity for pluralism, cooperation and learning. If students never come into contact with peers from different traditions, how will they develop any sort of appreciative knowledge, healthy relationships or positive attitudes with those peers?

We need to educate students who may not have any knowledge or experience with different world views.

We need student leaders on college campuses who are trained to promote healthy dialogue.

We need to encourage those hard conversations and provide open spaces for students to ask challenging questions and practice interfaith cooperation.

We need to educate students so together they can dismantle assumptions, stereotypes and discrimination on their campuses.

On Oct. 20-22, Grand Valley State University and Interfaith Youth Core will host the second annual Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab. At this weekend training, student leaders from across the state are invited to learn how to have healthy dialogue with and about different faith groups and how to promote interfaith engagement on their campuses.

This conference will include a training for resident advisers, a panel on religious traditions and extremism, coaching sessions for campus interfaith engagement and tours of different houses of worship. Students also will have the chance to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Baha'u'llah, prophet founder of the Baha'i faith, at East Grand Rapids High School Performing Arts Center.

The Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab, and other events like it, enable students to take an invaluable resource back to their respective campuses: collective imagination. Together, we might dare to dream how a world freed from bias and discrimination, filled with love and understanding, might take root on a campus near you.

For more information about the Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab, please visit interfaithunderstanding.org.

Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab

- › Oct. 20-22
- › Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids
- › Led by IFYC staff members, this conference welcomes student leaders from across the state for a weekend of building new relationships and training for interfaith engagement on college campuses.
- › To register, please visit bit.ly/2yjWhXO