



THE PRESIDENT'S INTERFAITH AND COMMUNITY SERVICE CAMPUS CHALLENGE

Case Studies and Best Practices for Interfaith Service



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CAMPUS CHALLENGE



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Background

The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge is a national initiative that was launched in 2011 by the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFBNP)—an office established in 2001 by President George W. Bush. In 2009, President Barack Obama appointed a panel of civic and religious leaders to his Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships including Interfaith Youth Core's (IFYC) Founder and President Eboo Patel. Based on recommendations from this inaugural Council, President Obama called on presidents of colleges and universities to make an institutional commitment to interfaith service work.

Since the launch of the President's Challenge, over 500 colleges and universities have answered the call and committed to advancing **interfaith service** and **interfaith engagement** on their campuses.

IFYC is a proud supporter of these participating institutions. In addition to serving as the non-profit partner organization for the President's Challenge, IFYC works with a network of colleges and universities to take a holistic approach to religious diversity, working with stakeholders across campus to foster sustainable commitment and measurable outcomes. Our partnerships also empower student leaders to be interfaith organizers and to ask how religious diversity should be understood and engaged by the entire student body. The result is a campus climate of interfaith cooperation, characterized by respect for individual religious and non-religious identities, mutually inspiring relationships across lines of difference, and a commitment to working together for the common good.

A number of institutions demonstrated this climate of interfaith cooperation on their campuses through plans and reports submitted to the White House. In the first year alone, President's Challenge campuses have involved over 200,000 participants in their interfaith service and interfaith engagement initiatives. Faculty, staff, and administrators from diverse academic and administrative offices planned and executed President's Challenge events and thousands of faith-based and secular student organizations organized and participated in interfaith service initiatives. These projects have



President Obama calls on presidents of colleges and universities to make an institutional commitment to interfaith work.

Interfaith service involves people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds tackling community challenges together - for example, Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Jews, and Muslims and non-believers-building a Habitat for Humanity house together. Interfaith service impacts specific community challenges from homelessness to mentoring to the environment, while building social capital and civility. (Source: White House Office of Faith-based Neighborhood Partnerships)

Interfaith engagement includes efforts to cultivate a positive interreligious climate on campus through communications, education, and capacity building initiatives. Examples include: an interfaith statement on the institution's website, educational panels, or religious and cultural diversity training for staff and faculty.

focused on key service areas of the **Kennedy Serve America Act** and allowed campuses to also involve hundreds of non-profit organizations and neighboring faith communities.

Kennedy Serve America Act

Service issues include:

Domestic Poverty

Education

Health Services

Energy and the Environment

Disaster Preparedness

Veterans & Military Families

Human Trafficking

The response to President Obama's challenge has exhibited the impact that diverse religious and non-religious college students can have on community needs and on each other, and the presidents and administrative leaders of colleges and universities have committed their institutions helping catalyze the interfaith service movement. This resource highlights the successes of the first year of the President's Challenge by featuring case studies and best practices of interfaith service work from participating institutions. This is a resource for students, staff, faculty, and administrators who have extended their commitment to leading the President's Challenge next year as well as those institutions that are cultivating interfaith service on campus for the first time.

Why Interfaith Matters

As religious diversity plays a growing role at the local, national, and global levels, American colleges and universities are poised to engage it in a way that fosters student development and shapes truly global citizens. Harvard scholar Diana Eck points out that "diversity" in and of itself is a neutral term and merely descriptive. 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 opportunities to work together and to talk and reflect on that shared action. 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?

Whereas many models of interfaith programming are dialogue-focused, interfaith service 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, building a foundation for tackling future, difficult conversations. Talking about religion and values, for both religious and non-religious students, tends to be difficult, especially in mixed religious company, and the dominant viewpoints 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 together opens up space for students to reclaim their values and to discover new ways of approaching religious difference.

President's Challenge campuses have spent the first two years of this initiative launching new models of interfaith engagement and improving long-standing service traditions in order to exemplify what interfaith cooperation can look like for broader society. These campuses represent the great diversity of colleges and universities across the country. They include large public universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, two-year institutions like Housatonic Community College in Connecticut, historically black colleges and universities like Morehouse College in Georgia, and private campuses like University of the Pacific in California.

While some institutions participate in the President's Challenge to engage the increasing religious and cultural diversity of their campuses, others involve a more homogenous student population through enhanced service-learning experiences and reflections to increase religious literacy. Regardless of the campus type, all participating institutions recognize the importance of prioritizing interfaith cooperation and growing the impact of this work.

President's Challenge campuses involved over 2,000 diverse student organizations including:

Catholic Campus Ministry, CRU, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Campus Ministry, Hillel, Hindu Students Association, Intersity Christian Fellowship, Muslim Students Association, Newman Center, Presbyterian Church USA, Campus Ministry, Secular Students Association, Unitarian Universalists, United Methodist Campus Ministry, and many more.

Campus Models for Interfaith Service

Hundreds of campuses took a variety of approaches to engage participants in interfaith service. Some facilitated interfaith reflection and dialogue after service events and others tied service-learning opportunities in the classroom to co-curricular interfaith events. The following campus models exemplify this approach.





The George Washington University Washington, D.C.

The George Washington University is a private research university in Washington, D.C. that brought together over 3,000 participants around interfaith service work and over 4,000 participants in interfaith engagement for the President's Challenge. To kick-off the year, interfaith was incorporated in the Freshman Day of Service, when students painted and cleaned area schools, retirement homes, and a public park on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. As part of their annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Interfaith Day of Service, teams of students beautified 14 public schools by painting 210 murals depicting interfaith leaders. This nearly 27,000-student university grew the impact of its interfaith service work by:

- Weaving in interfaith themes into existing service initiatives.
- Developing a “Religious Diversity Training” to grow the competence of campus leaders in discussing the religious and interfaith dimensions of their experiences.
- Establishing an Interfaith Council, comprised of student organization leaders, faculty, staff and members of University-affiliated religious clergy, to explore ways to broaden the discussion and capacity of interfaith service work, engagement and dialogues.
- Collaborating with multiple departments across the university in organizing President's Challenge initiatives. The George Washington University Office of University Events, along with the Department of Religious Studies, the Multicultural Student Services Center, and a number of student organizations promoted interfaith service initiatives to their constituents and co-led signature interfaith events.
- Hosting leading voices in the interfaith movement as keynote speakers including Eboo Patel (Interfaith Youth Core) and Brenda Girton-Mitchell (Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the Department of Education).





University of Wisconsin Madison, WI

University of Wisconsin-Madison is a public research university in Madison, Wisconsin, with an undergraduate student body of 29,000 students. Focusing their President's Challenge work on a set of service issues including hunger, homelessness, and educational opportunity, this campus engaged 200 student leaders in service work and over 2,000 in interfaith engagement. Service initiatives included Challah for Hunger, Badger Volunteer Interfaith Teams, and Love Thy Neighbor Day of Service. Their involvement in the President's Challenge also provided an opportunity to bridge the work of faculty and student affairs staff represented by the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, the Morgridge Center for Public Service, and the Multicultural Student Center. The diverse set of departments and student organizations leading the President's Challenge grew the impact of UW-Madison's interfaith service work by:



- Designating faith-based themes for interfaith engagement and interfaith service events. For example, students participated in Challah for Hunger, a national initiative that invites college students to bake Challah bread together and donate the proceeds from loaves sold to local charities. In a different vein, a panel discussion titled "Green Faith" focused on environmental stewardship, highlighting the voices of religiously diverse scholars and activists.
- Building capacity for interfaith leadership by hosting on-campus trainings from external organizations such as the Interfaith Youth Core as well as conducting internal trainings. Lubar Institute staff conducted interfaith trainings with Badger Volunteer Interfaith team members from the Morgridge Center.
- Garnering administrative-level support by connecting the Offices of the Vice Provost for Diversity and Climate and the Vice Provost for Student Life to their interfaith service work.



St. Edward's University *Austin, TX*

St. Edwards University is a Roman Catholic institution of 5,300 students based in Austin, Texas that focused its President's Challenge work around the theme of "Displacement, Migration, and Refugees." This campus engaged over 300 students in interfaith service work and logged over 300 service hours in addition to collecting money and clothing donations as part of disaster relief efforts for a drought-stricken neighboring community which lost over 1600 homes due to wild fires. Days of service were hosted as part of their President's Challenge events. The student group REACH OUT organized a Homeless Fair as part of Holy Cross Day of Service and the athletics department sponsored Global Sports Day, inviting area youth from low-income families to join in recreational activities. This campus tied the year of service work to interfaith cooperation by:



- Introducing service event participants to the purpose of the President's Challenge and their service theme for the year. Before each service event, a representative of the Campus Ministry or the Religion Department presented background information and prompted participants to reflect on the interfaith dimensions of their experiences. They also offered a workshop titled "How to Make it Interfaith" for interested participants.
- Growing cross-campus support for President's Challenge initiatives by drawing together 18 campus offices, four academic schools, and nine student organizations as participants in the year of events.
- Facilitating regional and national conversations about the impact of the President's Challenge. St. Edward's hosted a mid-year gathering with area institutions of higher education to discuss best practices of interfaith service work. They also maintained a webpage with updates and information about ongoing interfaith service initiatives as well as a Tumblr page featuring photos and educational materials from successful events.



Chapman University Orange, CA

Chapman University is a Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ- affiliated institution in Orange, California devoted to interfaith work through the Fish Interfaith Center and Wallace All Faiths Chapel, with a student body size of 7,400. Their President's Challenge work focused on environmental sustainability. Instead of creating new interfaith service initiatives, student involvement was linked to pre-existing community partnerships in need of support. University members participated in International Coastal Cleanup Day, drought resistant native habitat restoration, and developing a local water conservation demonstration garden. Faculty members incorporated interfaith engagement themes in their classrooms and over 500 students participated in the Challenge in the first year alone. Chapman linked its service to interfaith engagement by:



- Selecting service issues that connect with interfaith themes. Working with OC Watersheds Chapman trained college students as Watershed Education Ambassadors to offer presentations on water conservation and quality at local elementary schools in preparation for California state standards testing.
- Using inclusive language to invite both religiously affiliated and secular participants to join in President's Challenge events. Chapman extended its definition of *interfaith* to include atheist and agnostic perspectives.
- Developing a workshop to increase interfaith literacy and foster a campus climate that is open and affirming. The workshop, called "Intersections", was designed by Fish Interfaith Center staff and is regularly offered to students, staff and faculty from across the institution.
- Institutionalizing interfaith service through orientation and assessment. Every year, new students are invited to participate in Orientation activities that highlight the President's Challenge. Participants of all President's Challenge service events complete post-service evaluations asking them to reflect on their experiences with others from diverse faith backgrounds and how their service experience connects to interfaith cooperation.

Best Practices for Interfaith Service

Campuses involved in the President's Challenge took an institution-wide approach to advancing interfaith service through interfaith engagement initiatives. These best practices—drawn from the work of these campuses—highlight ways in which leadership of this initiative was modeled by leaders across campus including students, staff, faculty, and administrators.





Students

Best Practices for Interfaith Service

Mobilize the diverse faith-based and secular student organizations to get involved by co-sponsoring interfaith service events. Service projects can be more interfaith-focused if participants represent diverse secular, faith, or denominational perspectives.

Identify faculty members that will allow students to link interfaith service experiences with course work for credit. These faculty members may also encourage their students to participate in interfaith service events.

Reach out to faith or secular communities to involve congregants in service work and interfaith partnership with campus-based organizations. Often, congregations can offer funding, human power, and logistical support for service projects—not to mention religious diversity that may not be present at a more religiously homogeneous campus.

Gather fellow students to create an interfaith student organization if one does not already exist. If there is a pre-existing organization, draft a service commitment and involve the organization in service work with partner student organizations.

Reach out to departments or organizations that have a long-standing commitment to service work. They may be new to interfaith service or unsure how to engage the diverse religious and cultural identities of service participants. Work with them to develop an interfaith post-service reflection.



Best Practices for Interfaith Service

Cultivate student leadership by offering on-campus or off-campus interfaith training opportunities to students.

Offer exclusive opportunities for interfaith service work as part of orientation for peer leaders and students in leadership positions. Some campuses require all residence hall assistants to complete an interfaith training program and organize at least one interfaith service project with residents during the academic year.

Share interfaith service resources with student organizations to equip them with the tools to run effective and engaging service projects. This may be an interfaith reflection guide or a webpage linking to interfaith service opportunities.

Gather staff from residence life, service-focused offices, multicultural affairs, and other relevant spaces to form a planning committee. Some of the most effective President's Challenge campuses have been those where staff from diverse offices formed an organizing team.

Connect with staff from peer institutions about their interfaith service work. Convene colleagues from area campuses to share best practices. Consider co-organizing a regional interfaith service initiative.



Faculty

Best Practices for Interfaith Service

Partner with faculty across academic departments to form a planning committee for the President's Challenge.

Consider ways to link students' curricular and extra-curricular interfaith service experiences by offering in-class opportunities to reflect and share their experiences with their peers.

Create opportunities for students to earn course credit through involvement in interfaith service initiatives.

Link course material, or an interfaith themed campus-wide common book reading project to relevant community service opportunities outside of the classroom. Create opportunities to build interfaith and religious literacy¹ in the classroom.

Find ways to connect class projects to the President's Challenge service theme. One campus encouraged a communications class to create an advertising strategy for a local non-profit organization that supports a refugee community. This type of curricular/co-curricular intersection is not restricted to Religious Studies departments.

¹*Interfaith literacy is the type of knowledge that builds positive attitudes and relationships, and ultimately contributes to a civic social good.*



Administrators

Best Practices for Interfaith Service

Share the campus commitment to interfaith service on a public platform. The president or provost may send a letter inviting individuals and departments across the campus to participate in the initiative or reference the President's Challenge at a public speech.

Form an advisory committee of academic and administrative leaders to explore how the President's Challenge connects to the institution's vision and mission and how different offices can support interfaith service on campus.

Participate in a large-scale day of interfaith service or other campus-wide event to endorse the interfaith service work of students, staff, and faculty through administrative involvement.

Grant a special award or recognition for individuals who demonstrate inspirational leadership and commitment to advancing interfaith service and interfaith engagement. This recognition may be added to a pre-existing process or part of a new venue to elevate these leaders.

Attend the President's Challenge annual convening with a delegation of student, staff, and faculty leaders to represent the institution's work on a national level and engage with peer institutions in best practices sharing.



NEXT STEPS

Join the President's Challenge by visiting: whitehouse.gov/interfaithservice

*Share your best practices for interfaith service work and connect with other President's Challenge campuses on Facebook by searching for: **The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge***