

# Designing Responsive Interfaith Programs

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Recent findings from the [Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey \(IDEALS\)](#) revealed a gap between college students' interfaith values and action: while many are committed to bridging religious divides, they often fail to pursue opportunities for interfaith engagement. We might expect to see this gap widen further at a time when many students and institutions of higher education are facing unprecedented challenges. However, there are many ways interfaith can be leveraged to address the challenges of the day—and we must creatively imagine how to do so. A recent Interfaith America article underscored [five reasons why interfaith should be prioritized right now](#); this resource offers five ways to make interfaith programs *successful* in the current context.

**Make interfaith opportunities efficient and enticing.** Our time and energy may be constrained more than ever before as we navigate a rapidly changing educational landscape in the wake of Covid-19. Interfaith programs that acknowledge this reality could prove to be more appealing for students and staff alike in the current context. Virtual “lunch and learn” events or coffee breaks are ideal spaces to engage with new people and ideas during a busy day. Alternately, interfaith activities can be tailored for groups that already convene regularly (e.g., faculty or staff working groups, living-learning communities). Finally, you might consider offering incentives for participation in interfaith learning and development opportunities. These could include transcript notations, certificates of completion, or online badges like those awarded to individuals who complete the [We Are Each Other's curricular tracks](#) offered by IFYC.

**Develop interfaith programs that are responsive to issues of common concern.** During this time of upheaval, one might wonder how interfaith engagement could possibly be prioritized. One way of doing so involves addressing issues that are plaguing our nation through an interfaith lens. Last spring, some campuses began offering [spiritual support to](#)

students via virtual programs that helped them process the uncertainty and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. More recently, IFYC offered a virtual event featuring three innovative campus programs integrating interfaith and racial equity. As we have seen over the past year, the shift to Zoom and other online platforms has made it possible to include experts from near and far in an array of campus programs without the usual financial and geographic constraints. In this vein, myriad opportunities exist to invite new people to the table to reflect on how interfaith diversity relates to pressing matters of our time.

### **Account for the strengths and limitations of virtual spaces when planning online events.**

After the onset of Covid-19, many people scrambled to move in-person events online via Zoom and other platforms. It quickly became apparent that what works face-to-face is not always effective in a virtual space. At the same time, virtual programming offers some unique advantages that we are just beginning to maximize. When it comes to interfaith, Zoom may not be the most effective medium for guest lectures or one-directional presentations about religious diversity since programs that are more passive make it easy to “check out” or multitask. But in this time of physical separation, interactive programs have tremendous potential to cultivate relationships while also building understanding across diverse values and beliefs. Zoom can be leveraged to bring together diverse audiences, engage people in more intimate conversations via breakout rooms, and keep conversation flowing in the chat—ultimately providing human connection that is central to successful interfaith work.

**Support the development of interfaith competencies among faculty.** Though many interfaith programs take place in co-curricular spaces, opportunities abound within in college classrooms to underscore the relevance of religious diversity and inclusion in today’s social and civic contexts. In courses ranging from business management to medical ethics, from religious studies to American history, there are occasions to increase students’ understanding of religious differences and educate about interfaith cooperation as a strategy for addressing societal problems. Unfortunately, faculty often feel ill-prepared to navigate interfaith conversations in their courses—and many actively avoid religious topics altogether. To make the classroom a more viable space for fostering students’ interfaith learning and development, consider introducing faculty to existing tools and curricula or encouraging their participation in educational offerings like IFYC’s annual Interfaith Leadership Institute and ongoing online learning opportunities.

**Be strategic when planning your next interfaith event.** Ensuring that interfaith programs on your campus yield enthusiasm and widespread participation—thus narrowing the gap between students’ values and actions—will require forethought and a keen understanding of your institutional context. To increase the likelihood of success for your next initiative, begin your planning process by reflecting on the following questions:

1. What are some existing activities or programs (service, art, music, meals) that are enticing to students right now? How can interfaith be woven into these offerings on your campus?
2. What opportunities exist on your campus to address student needs and matters of concern through an interfaith lens? What tools, resources, and professional connections

at your disposal to do so?

3. What in-person interfaith programs are most likely to be successful in a virtual environment? What strategies will you implement to make interfaith offerings engaging online?

4. How can you make the case that interfaith is relevant for students and faculty in different fields of study? What do faculty on your campus need to take the next steps toward integrating interfaith in their classrooms?

5. How do answers to the above questions shape your next interfaith event? What colleagues and other stakeholders should you invite into the planning process to ensure you have institutional buy-in and strong student participation?

## **Related Resources**

[IDEALS Homepage](#)

[IFYC We Are Each Other's Campaign](#)

[IFYC Interfaith Leadership Institute](#)

[IFYC Alumni Speakers & Trainers Bureau](#)

[IFYC Training Tools & Curricula](#)

[IFYC Online Learning Opportunities](#)

[Article: Covid-19 Sparks \(Virtual\) Mindfulness on Campuses](#)

[Article: How to Shift Interfaith Training Online](#)

[Article: A Virtual Event that Builds Genuine Connection](#)

[Article: Five Reasons to Prioritize Interfaith Engagement Now](#)

[Virtual Event: Reimagining Interfaith in 2020: A Call to Action for Higher Education](#)

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