

## **Universities, faith and respect: background paper**

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### **Harnessing students and staff through extracurricular activity**

Studies have shown that campus involvement by way of extracurricular activities creates positive benefits in terms of social, intellectual and emotional development (Astin, 1993; Huang and Chang, 2004; Kuh, 1995). Due to the social and personal challenges that a student must face from different engagements, they are encouraged to develop more complex outlooks regarding social and personal matters. In addition, extracurricular activities provide opportunities for integrating in-class experiences into real-life situations. Holzweiss et al (2008) state that some of the various benefits stemming from extracurricular activities include: 'career development, improved interpersonal relations, and the development of job-specific skills, interpersonal communication skills, leadership skills, and general business skills, as well as learning more about service to others'.

Placing this within an interfaith context, it would seem there is a lack of research into the contributions and benefits of extracurricular activities promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding. It could therefore be seen as an essential topic of discussion given the broader debate on extracurricular activities contributing to social and personal development. Extracurricular activities can further complement curricular efforts to reinforce and potentially further develop interfaith understanding. For example, experiential approaches could be used such as cultural exchanges and immersion opportunities.

While students who study a programme based on religious studies might have more access to the commonalities of major religions and may even have events incorporated into their course structures, students pursuing other degrees may be less exposed to an interfaith concept. Extracurricular activities could be beneficial in promoting interfaith understanding for such individuals, however the benefits still remain for those engaged in religious-orientated degrees.

One particular study (Acar, 2013) was carried out into the varied extracurricular activities of a Turkish Muslim student association at a Catholic liberal arts college in the USA. The findings were coherent with the broader discussion on positive outcomes of extracurricular activities for students. These benefits according to the students were:

1. Educational knowledge of religious similarities and common history  
Students in the study reported activities gave them opportunities for sharing cultural wealth and to grow from learned knowledge about other students. They asserted that they were able to have a greater understanding and developed tolerance and friendships with individuals from different religions to themselves.
2. Contributions to students' own decision-making about religious issues  
Particular extracurricular events equipped students with access to the facts about other religions and therefore helped to enable their own decision-making and judgements about current religious issues. The student association gave them information to help enable an understanding of religious conflicts of which they knew little about, having only gained their information from mass media/internet. The events provided a platform to inquire and make personal decisions.
3. Expanded socialisation of students  
Students emphasized that the extracurricular activities helped them to meet and socialize with people from diverse backgrounds that they may not have come in to contact with before. Students reported making friends via their realisation and appreciation of religious commonalities.

## Questions for consideration

- How do you engage students and staff to partake in extracurricular activities that involve the common good?
- What is the optimal combination and amount of extracurricular activities to enhance interfaith understanding among student and staff?
- How can students from different faith backgrounds to those pertaining in the local community be protected from persecution?
- Many universities involved in local social action are members of the Talloires Network. Should such activities be part of the academic promotion process?