

Proposal for the Interfaith Action Initiative

Our proposal, the Interfaith Action Initiative (IAI), seeks to increase the opportunities for interaction between students of different faiths at UC Berkeley. We believe that open dialogue and collaboration are increasingly important in order to build a strong campus community around issues central to students of all faiths. We also believe that collaborative projects could plant seeds that have a profound impact on how students perceive religious traditions—their own and others—as they leave campus.

The Need

Despite a plethora of religious activity on this campus, no central body exists to coordinate communication between students of faith. In an age where religion is often cited as the primary cause of conflict on a local, national, and international scale, the university setting offers a unique opportunity for dialogue and collaboration that can dramatically alter the way students perceive religion's role in the public sphere.

Each semester, 40 to 60 religious student organizations register in the Office of Student Life, including the Muslim Student Association, the Hindu Student Association, the Jewish Student Union, and diverse Christian groups such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Newman Hall Cal Catholic Community, and the Korean-American Campus Mission. The myriad of groups provide many students of faith on this campus with a religious community and guidance for their personal growth and exploration of their own faith traditions. However, the students involved in religious organizations on campus rarely have the opportunity to interact with students from other organizations. Such divisions hinder learning and growth that could come about as a result of honest dialogue and cooperative projects between students of different faiths.

Institutional History

On an institutional level, the imperative for such an initiative has not gone unnoticed. The Office of Student Life created the University Religious Council (URC), a voluntary interfaith council of campus ministries that meets occasionally. Its representatives come from Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Hindu, and Baha'i organizations, but its activities primarily involve directing students to local churches, temples, and mosques, rather than catalyzing interfaith programming. Unfortunately, since 2000, the URC has existed more in name than in reality. They have only met a few times in recent years. Furthermore, the URC consists of clergy from faith communities rather than students. The collapse of the institutional response has created a void of University-sponsored dialogue.

Student History

In recent years, several student groups have initiated their own interfaith projects. One example is the Progressive Students of Faith, a group that seeks to unify spiritual progressives and to strengthen the voice of progressive people of faith on Cal's campus. This group was established in response to the 2004 presidential election by students of faith who felt the Christian Right was shutting out other religious perspectives on political and social issues.

Although it is supported by the First Congregational Church of Berkeley, it is not a Christian organization.

Another example of current interfaith work can be found in an informal conversation group made up of students from the Jewish Student Union (JSU) and Muslim Students Association (MSA), which takes place on a weekly basis and culminated this spring in a joint dinner and panel on each faith's approach to the afterlife.

At a more academic level, the creation of the student group "CURIA: Campus Undergraduates interested in Religion and International Affairs," represents another student-led attempt to think about contemporary religious issues. This group, made up of students from across the religious spectrum, meets weekly to discuss timely events involving religion and world affairs, such as the Pope's visit to Turkey and Hindu Nationalism in India.

That such groups have already begun this work underscores the grassroots interest in interfaith issues. By establishing a center for interfaith dialogue and programming, our hope is to provide continuing support for these existing efforts while simultaneously developing new initiatives and projects.

Vision

Certainly, all of these initiatives are to be applauded and are indicative of the desire for a concerted dialogue between students of different faiths. The IAI seeks to create a space that is politically neutral, that expands interfaith conversations, and that has the resources and commitment to sustain such conversations and collaborative campus initiatives over time.

Goals

The IAI's vision includes four goals:

- To create a space in which students can learn about other faith traditions and meet students of different faiths in an open, inviting, and challenging atmosphere. Students who are not necessarily affiliated with a religious student organization are also welcome.
- To serve as an amplifying body on issues that affect all students of faith on a college campus, e.g. the creation of public prayer space.
- To provide an opportunity for students of faith to experience principled pluralism and to learn to see geopolitical conflicts through each others' eyes.
- To create a space for students to discuss controversial topics that involve the intersection of religion and politics in the 21st century, and to brainstorm creative approaches to resolve the tensions created by these conflicts.

Activities

The IAI's current goals are to initiate links between the faith communities through four main activities. The IAI plans to implement the following measures this coming year:

- Create an email listserv that compiles interfaith events as well as those of various campus religious organizations and local faith groups into a single, weekly email intended for students of faith.
- Plan and implement a community service day that brings together students from different

faith groups to work on service projects around the Berkeley community. The day would culminate with a shared meal and reflection.

- Produce an interfaith publication that includes articles from existing religious groups' publications as well as articles encouraging dialogue and student scholarship in print.
- Through the above activities, lay the groundwork for the creation of a student-led interfaith council in 2008.

Though our email listserv, community service day, and interfaith publication, we hope to create a community of students invested in this work. The IAI's long-term goal is to institutionalize an interfaith council for representative students from different religious student groups that meets regularly. Such a council will not only continue the projects that we are currently initiating, but also facilitate conversations between students of faith. It will address priority concerns of faithful students on campus. Once the council takes hold, the IAI would organize panels with local religious figures, religious scholars, and academic experts. It would create dialogue groups for students, as well as task forces which work towards mutually beneficial changes, such as a securing a non-denominational chaplain or prayer space on campus. In addition, the IAI would eventually oversee CURIA and help develop CURIA's conversations into a deCal curriculum. Other goals for the future of the IAI include collaboration with interfaith efforts on other college campuses and the planning of service trips similar to Alternative Breaks which would bring together students of different faiths to work on issues of mutual importance.

While we believe the IAI's long-term goal to be essential to our mission, as students on the UC Berkeley campus, we understand that a council such as the one we envision can realistically only be created once the IAI's name is established as an integral part of the campus faith community. We believe that the email listserv, community service day, and interfaith publication will serve as the foundation for the IAI's future work. We hope that our programming in the coming year will demonstrate our commitment to our goals. Furthermore, since our long-term goal requires additional funding, we hope that funding from the ASUC and outside sources will increase once the IAI has established its reputation within the campus community.

Building Ties with Students, Faculty, Staff, and External Collaborators

We envision the IAI as embedded within both the campus community and existing faith communities. Already, the IAI has links to the Religion, Politics, and Globalization Program (RPGP) at UC Berkeley and hopes to build those ties. Sara Heitler Bamberger, Program Coordinator of the RPGP, has already served as an advisor to this proposal and is willing to continue her involvement next year. Additional external collaborators include Rabbi Dorothy Richman of Berkeley Hillel, Dr. Hatem Bazian of the Muslim Students Association, and Rev. Shelly Dieterle of the First Congregational Church of Berkeley. They have all been consulted in the development of this proposal and are enthusiastic about a more robust, student-driven interfaith alliance.

Eventually, we would like to foster links with the Office of Student Life in order to develop a full-time interfaith coordinator position. We would also like to develop relations with local ministries, synagogues, temples, and mosques. In order to improve upon our existing institutional ties at UC Berkeley, in the coming three to five years, the IAI would develop a faculty advisory board. This board would be made up of 3-5 faculty members, who while not

necessarily professors of religion, have a strong personal commitment to seeing an interfaith group established at UC Berkeley.

Conclusion

There is currently a pressing need for dialogue among students of faith on the UC Berkeley campus. Our proposal builds on existing programs and ties among the faith community and offers concrete steps to building a student-led interfaith initiative. Through increased dialogue and interfaith projects, IAI has the potential not just to affect the students directly involved, but to create a knowledge-based pluralism that permeates the campus climate as a whole.

Team Members

Carson Baucher is a second year at UC Berkeley majoring in Classical Languages and Rhetoric. He is an active member of the Progressive Students of Faith. He is especially interested in law and politics. He is from Fresno, California.

Jonathan Blake is a senior majoring in Political Science. He has conducted research on violence during peace processes after civil wars. He has served on the board of the Israel Action Committee, and is an active member of the Jewish student organization Berkeley Hillel. He has studied in Budapest, Hungary and traveled significantly around Europe and the Middle East. He hails from Culver City, California.

Daniel Saver is a senior with a double major in Religious Studies and Classical Civilization. His thesis is on the role of renunciation and asceticism in ancient Hinduism. He is the founder of CURIA: Campus Undergraduates interested in Religion and International Affairs. Daniel is originally from Florida.

Hosna Sheikholeslami is a fourth year majoring in Comparative Literature, writing an honors thesis about medieval English texts based on biblical stories. She is an active member of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) at UC Berkeley and currently works for the Religion, Politics, and Globalization Program. She is from the Bay Area.

Advisors for IAI include: Sara Heitler Bamberger, The Religion, Politics, and Globalization Program; Dr. Hatem Bazian, Muslim Student's Association; Rev. Shelley Dieterle, Minister of Campus Life, First Congregational Church of Berkeley; Rabbi Dorothy Richman, Berkeley Hillel

Primary Contact

Hosna Sheikholeslami
hsheik@berkeley.edu
(925) 330-4274

We consent to the online public dissemination of this white paper.

Proposed Budget

With our proposed budget, the IAI would be able to provide stipends for two student interns to fulfill our goals for the coming year as well as lay the foundations for the development of an interfaith council by meeting with student leaders of faith. They would also be responsible for securing ASUC student group funding for the IAI's programming and publication.

DESCRIPTION	
<u>Personnel</u>	
2 student interns @10 hours/week for 20 weeks	\$4,000
UCB Staff Liaison Sara Heitler Bamberger	In-kind
TOTAL STIPENDS:	\$4,000
<u>Community Service Day Costs</u>	
Dinner for Participants (40 participants, \$10/person)	400
Lunch for Participants (40 participants, \$5/person)	200
TOTAL CONFERENCE COSTS:	\$600
<u>Journal Costs</u>	
Photocopying and printing	\$300
Editing and Graphic Design	In-kind
Misc. Supplies and other related Expenses	100
TOTAL JOURNAL COSTS:	\$400
TOTAL COSTS:	\$5,000
	\$5,000
TOTAL BUDGET REQUEST	