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Proposal to Better Support Religious Groups at Binghamton University

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Introduction & Background

In Spring 2016, I finished my internship in Multicultural Resources Center (MRC) at Binghamton University. With the purpose of promoting diversity on campus, MRC offers various training programs and educational opportunities for university students and staff. Currently, MRC has served cultural groups, LGBTQ, religious groups. However, it is lack of meaningful activities to support the religious groups. Therefore, my project aims to help MRC to identify effective ways to better serve the religious community on campus.

In 2011, President Obama launched the Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. It encourages people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds addressing community challenges together. Although Binghamton University is on the list of the Community Service Honor Roll, the university has not been recognized for Interfaith partnership.

My project will assist Binghamton University in actively responding to President Obama's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. Also, it will contribute to meet one of Binghamton University's Strategic Priorities --- to unite to foster a diverse and inclusive campus culture.

Research Method

15 telephone interviews with the main staff in different universities across the country who are responsible for interfaith service offering.

2 telephone interviews with a student leader of Hillel-Jewish Student Union and an E-board member of Newman Catholic Association at Binghamton University.

Positions including: chaplain, director of Religious Diversity, associate dean, campus minister, program manager and coordinator

Interview Questions:
- Do you have interfaith council or similar organization? How does it function?
- Are you satisfied with the interfaith council? Why or why not?
- Anything needs to be improved?
- What are the essential elements/requirements to create a successful interfaith council?
- How’s your relationship with other religious groups?
- Have you ever cooperated with other religious groups?
- Have you ever met any conflict with other religious groups?

Conclusion

Level of Satisfaction of interfaith councils in 15 Universities

- Very satisfied: 7%
- Satisfied but needs improvement: 47%
- Not sure: 46%

Recommendations

Since recognizing the importance of building Interfaith Councils on campus after interviews, I suggest MRC apply the network governance model as the guide to create the appropriate organizational structure of the interfaith council.

The Model of Collaborative Governance

In the stage of preparation to create interfaith council, MRC should pay attention to:
- Potential imbalances between the resources/power of different religious groups, particularly the equal portion of representatives from different religious groups. (Tip: how to have some real diversity of folks on the council, if interfaith council is 100% of Jewish and Muslim, is it not real diversity.)
- Identify the incentives that religious groups have to collaborate, e.g., conflict resolution, sharing limited funds.
- To ask for the institutional support to be part of university in a professional way, e.g., obtaining the approval from superior level(s) of school.

During the process of creation:
- MRC needs to do promotion of what is interfaith council and why do we need it across the campus, e.g., presentation or diversity talk show with the theme of interfaith council.
- MRC should launch advertising activities, e.g., send out religious groups the invitations to create interfaith council via flyers and emails.
- Based on the response, MRC should choose a meeting location for application and screening process including interviews.
- After confirming groups involved, MRC will start to organize chair, co-chair, interfaith coordinator, advisors, representatives from different organizations, etc.
- It is important to set clear ground rules based on understanding and respect among all groups.
- MRC and council members should collaboratively produce and understand clear plans and mission to ensure they will meet consistently on the right track.
- Other suggestions:
  - When recruiting student representatives from different religious groups, MRC should consider their passion, commitment, leadership, and experience.
  - When recruiting student representatives from different religious groups, MRC should collaborate, e.g., sharing learning, bringing new people.

This form of governance helps MRC to choose an appropriate organizational structure when creating the interfaith council. MRC can play the role of the lead organization to coordinate all major network-level activities, key decisions, and administration work to achieve the council’s goals.

Trust: "definitely not as familiar as I'd like to be, due the fact that I'm the president, I would say I know more than average person does.

Goal Consensus: different religious organizations have their different organizational goals + network-level goals (more similarities)

Need for Network-Level Competencies: Interdependent task requirements are high, MRC will be more effective with specialty skills like grant wiring/ conflict resolution than other groups.

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Reference: