

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY JOIN NEW EFFORT TO BRIDGE AMERICA'S GROWING POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVIDES

For interview requests or to attend the event contact Paul Brandeis Raushenbush on 646.464.2882 or paul@ifyc.org.

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Political and religious polarization is threatening the very fabric of our civil society, and colleges and universities are increasingly becoming ground zero in these battles.

With a recent uptick in hate crimes and deep divisions on campuses across the country, 14 colleges and universities — including Middlebury, Brigham Young, Gordon and Oberlin — are joining a new initiative designed to bridge the religious and political divides spreading through higher education. The effort, Courageous Pluralism, will provide grants and capacity building to the schools as they work to narrow those divisions through interfaith courses, formalized ways for students with diverse viewpoints to meet and interact, and other innovative new programs

“American campuses can play a critical role in re-committing to our nation’s core values, strengthening free expression while bridging diverse religious and political identities and casting a vision for an inclusive society,” says Dr. Eboo Patel, Founder and President of Interfaith Youth Core, the national non-profit running this program.

Courageous Pluralism will launch in Washington, D.C. in partnership with the Aspen Institute Inclusive America project on February 3rd, including a religiously and ideologically diverse public panel titled *Holy Bridges: The Role of Religion and American Polarization* moderated by NPR’s Tom Gjelten.

“Religious pluralism is central to the purpose of the Aspen Institute, which is to create a free, just, and equitable society” said Dan Porterfield, the Institute’s President and CEO. “Interfaith work on college campuses is a great example of how to make progress toward this goal by cultivating in students the critical skill sets and experiences they need to thrive in a religiously diverse world.”

Approximately 40 staff, faculty, and administrators from the schools will spend two days planning programs that forge relationships between people of different and often opposing worldviews, help them find common ground, and identify strategies for increased collaboration in their communities. Some programs will happen on individual campuses



while others will include joint programs between multiple schools. Each of the fourteen colleges and universities has been “paired” with an unlikely partner - connecting liberal arts colleges with evangelical schools, for example - which allows for bridge-building efforts within and across diverse communities. The full list of participating campuses is included below.

“The provision for a truly pluralistic society - where people of all religious views can be fully themselves - is one of the great gifts of our nation’s founders,” said Shirley Mullen, the president of Houghton College, one of the participating institutions. “This program is about preparing graduates who will lead our society in reclaiming this treasured gift from our founders in 21st-century America.”

Courageous Pluralism is supported by the Fetzer Institute and the Charles Koch Foundation. “Universities hold the solution to polarization,” said Charles Koch Institute director of free expression Sarah Ruger. “Students are hungry to understand the complexity of diverse views, but dialogue across divides is inherently difficult. Campuses and programs like IFYC’s Courageous Pluralism provide the open, respectful environment necessary for doing that productively.” Sharif Azami, senior program officer at the Fetzer Institute, adds, “Understanding how to constructively engage diversity has never been more important, with significant implications for social cohesion and the broader democracy enterprise.”

Courageous Pluralism includes participation from the following campuses. The Oberlin-Spring Arbor collaboration is also supported by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations:

- Gordon College (MA) – Middlebury College (VT)
- Calvin University (MI) – Grand Valley State University (MI)
- Eastern University (PA) – Lincoln University (PA)
- Houghton College (NY) – Ithaca College (NY)
- Brigham Young University (UT) – Westminster College (UT)
- Mount Vernon Nazarene University (OH) – Kenyon College (OH)
- Spring Arbor University (OH) – Oberlin College (OH)

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