

PROFESSIONAL APPLICATIONS OF INTERFAITH SKILL SETS AND COMPETENCIES



RESOURCE SUMMARY

College and university students, staff, faculty, and administrators alike are grappling with the professional applicability of various academic programs and co-curricular activities. As interfaith initiatives continue to take shape in the curriculum and the co-curriculum, IFYC is invested in supporting colleges and universities as they consider how interfaith work can translate into job opportunities, career preparedness, and career satisfaction. Through three recent research initiatives, IFYC has come to better understand the exciting ways in which interfaith skill sets and competencies are applicable in professional settings, both from the perspective of young professionals and their employers. This resource summarizes research findings into the following five learnings:

1

Employers from diverse professional sectors express the value of employees who are equipped with interfaith skill sets and competencies.

2

There is a lack of expertise and training within the workforce about how to directly address religious and philosophical diversity, despite the fact that employers find this skill set to be important.

3

While participating in curricular or co-curricular interfaith programs, undergraduate students develop professionally useful skill sets that are both transferable and interfaith-specific.

4

Students are able to leverage these skill sets in their résumés in order to make themselves more competitive in the job market, as well as put their interfaith training to use in their careers and graduate studies.

5

Interfaith skill sets are applicable across a diverse range of professional sectors, and interfaith training can also help students discern which career paths to pursue.

These five learnings are expanded upon in the following sections.

PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYERS AND MANAGERS

Employers and managers from a diverse range of professional fields value when employees are equipped with interfaith skill sets and competencies. However, employees usually do not receive such training on the job, and often lack the expertise needed to fully engage matters of religious or philosophical diversity. This points to the value of spaces within higher education to equip students with these skill sets before they enter the workforce.

Learning #1: Employers from diverse professional sectors express the value of employees who are equipped with interfaith skill sets and competencies.

To better understand the specific interfaith-based skill sets and needs of various professional sectors, IFYC conducted interviews in 2014 with carefully-selected focus groups from the sectors of Healthcare, Business, Education, Fundraising, and Public Leadership. The data points and quotations listed below are taken from these sector-based focused groups.

- ▶ **Healthcare professionals** report that religious literacy¹ is the most important interfaith skill they use in their work, because issues related to religious identity are directly relevant to healthcare outcomes. There's also a tremendous need for conversations about religious practice to become part of the field: 50% of patients wish doctors asked about religious practices during their appointments with physicians?²

“When receiving cancer diagnoses, you see a lot of reactions that relate to faith. Doctors sometimes forget that a person has a backstory and they aren't just a list of symptoms. Being able to talk to them about their faith is a part of their care. Doctors talk about ‘will to live’ having such an impact on survival rates, and that's often driven by faith. I see a lot of doctors get ‘deer in headlights’ looks when patients receive cancer diagnoses and call out to God—they don't know what to do.”— Victoria P., Medical Resident

- ▶ **Educators** express the desire to have the appropriate training for responding to religious bigotry, identifying needs associated with students' religious and ethical traditions, and creating a safe classroom environment for students who orient around religion differently.

“As a teacher, I see issues related to religion come up a lot. Recently one of our middle school students sat out during recess and didn't want to play with the other children. A teacher approached that student and encouraged him to play and became upset when he didn't. The teachers later found out that the student was fasting for Ramadan, and didn't want to play because he was tired.” – Adina T., Teacher

- ▶ **Business professionals** and global companies are beginning to recognize that it's a business advantage to build a diverse and inclusive workforce, and to do so they must begin to address religion. Business leaders are working in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized, and

¹ For the purpose of this resource, IFYC draws upon Stephen Prothero's definition of religious literacy: “the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions - their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.” Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - And Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 15.

² Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, <https://tanenbaum.org>.

to maintain a competitive advantage they need to have a basic understanding around cultural and religious differences.

“We’ve just hired a consultant to review our religious diversity policies and practices. We celebrate holidays and provide accommodations for the religious needs of our staff, but it’s also important on an interpersonal level because we are a global company and our team members interact across cultural lines.” – Diane B., Corporate Inclusive Diversity Senior Manager, Allstate Insurance

- ▶ **Fundraisers** need to have a strong understanding of how different religious and nonreligious traditions approach giving and charity. Religious and philosophical values are often primary reasons for contributing financially to a cause, so fundraising professionals are more effective when they can tap into these motivations within their donor base.

“When I worked for United Way’s Development team in California, we ran an anti-poverty campaign. I found out that faith communities were completely left out of this campaign, so I met with Executive team at United Way to help them craft a strategy for fundraising with religious communities, which turned out to be really successful.” – Nikole S., United Way

- ▶ **Public leaders** need to have basic religious literacy to be able to serve the communities they represent. Public leaders are tasked with navigating numerous hot button issues within policy and government (e.g. abortion and same-sex marriage), and should be able to draw upon interfaith leadership skills to positively engage different viewpoints around those issues.

“I took a public stance for marriage equality, and in the process of doing that angered a few conservative religious communities who threatened to tell their congregants not to vote for me, which ran into issues of church state separation. As someone in public leadership, you have to have the ability to engage hot button issues, issues that resonate differently with different people, and choose a pathway but not inflaming the community so much that you lose your seat.” – Mayor Brede of Rochester, Minnesota

Learning #2: There is a lack of expertise and training within the workforce about how to directly address religious and philosophical diversity, despite the fact that employers find this skill set to be important.

During the summer of 2015, IFYC administered Religious Diversity in Professional Environments grants to 10 different colleges and universities. Generously funded by the James F. Kemper Foundation, the goal of these grants was to support the development of student-faculty research projects that explore religious diversity in various professional settings. Faculty and student researchers achieved this goal through both qualitative and quantitative research methods, conducting on-site interviews as well as online surveys. The following data points highlight the findings from four different research teams that participated in this grant project.

- ▶ From research conducted at three different professional sites (a local hotel, manufacturing plant, and library), a research team from Concordia College (Moorhead, MN) found that **no company offered systematic training around religious diversity**. However, employees at every site collectively expressed a desire for religious diversity training, including increased access to

knowledge of other religions and their practices as well as practical resources for grappling with religious diversity in the workplace.³

- ▶ From their research at a local insurance agency, a research team from Meredith College (Raleigh, NC) also found that **religion and religious identity are not addressed in a direct way**. They found that diversity training focuses more on ‘protected classes of people,’ and religious identity is to be understood within that umbrella.⁴
- ▶ In their interviews with a local health care facility, a research team from Utah Valley University (Orem, UT) could not identify any ongoing training opportunities around religious diversity issues. The research team found that this area of **diversity training would have been useful** as it relates to the religious sensitivities in patient care.⁵
- ▶ In their interviews with a local marketing agency, a research team from Bethel University (St. Paul, MN) found that conversations around diversity are considered important in the life of the company. However, most intentional conversations or diversity trainings focus on race and sexual orientation, not religion. Interviewees at this agency all noted that **religion is not a category that initially comes to mind** when they think of “diversity.”⁶

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG PROFESSIONALS AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

Alongside the voices of employers, young professionals and graduate students also emphasize the value of interfaith skill sets and competencies beyond their undergraduate careers. Having participated in undergraduate interfaith programming, young professionals and graduate students claim to benefit from both interfaith-specific and transferable skill sets. Furthermore, these skill sets are being leveraged in résumés to secure a job or gain acceptance into a graduate program. This points to the value for spaces within higher education to equip students with interfaith-based skill sets before they enter the workforce, which can help them secure a job and excel in their careers post-graduation.

Through two different surveys (conducted in 2014 and 2016), IFYC gathered information from alumni of its programs to better understand how interfaith skills and competencies are being used in their professional lives. The goal of the 2014 survey was to gather career or graduate study interests of seniors and IFYC alumni, and to evaluate the value of their undergraduate interfaith involvement to their career success. The goal of the 2016 survey was to gather information on the career and civic interests of IFYC alumni. The data points listed under learnings 3-5 highlight the findings from these two surveys.

³ The project lead from Concordia College’s research team was Jacqueline Bussie, Professor of Religion and Director of the Forum on Faith and Life.

⁴ The project lead from Meredith College’s research team was Margarita Suarez, Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies.

⁵ The project lead from Utah Valley University’s research team was Brian Birch, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for the Study of Ethics.

⁶ The project lead from Bethel University’s research team was Amy Poppinga, Instructor in History, and Mary Ann Harris, Professor of Business.

Learning #3: While participating in curricular or co-curricular interfaith programs, undergraduate students develop professionally useful skill sets that are both transferable and interfaith-specific.

- ▶ Alumni of undergraduate interfaith programs report that fostering dialogue, navigating hot topics, mobilizing others for a cause, and using religious literacy are the **interfaith-based skills** have been most useful in their job searches or careers thus far.

“Focusing on shared values has been useful in asking communities to come together around policy issues” – Aditi S., Law Student

- ▶ Alumni of undergraduate interfaith programs report that leadership, empathy, communication, teamwork, and the ability to network are the **transferrable skills** that have been most useful in their job searches or careers thus far.

“The ‘soft’ skills of leadership, teamwork, empathy are always critical to success in my field, and having a track record with these was a critical part of getting my current job.” – Lauren M., Ashoka

LEARNING #4: Students are able to leverage these skill sets in their résumés in order to make themselves more competitive in the job market, as well as put their interfaith training to use in their careers and graduate studies.

- ▶ The majority of students who have participated in undergraduate interfaith programs claim that both transferable and interfaith-specific knowledge and skill sets **helped them get a job.**

“My resume would be much weaker without the leadership experience I have gained from my interfaith work.” – Elizabeth M., Interfaith Power & Light

- ▶ Both young professions and graduate students (78% and 71%, respectively) report that **topics related to religious identity, religious communities, or religious diversity** have emerged in the context of their work or graduate studies.

“Occasions have come up where producers, aware of my interfaith background, ask me to check scripts to make sure they’re using the correct language when speaking about religions.” – Tiffany C., MSNBC

LEARNING #5: Interfaith skill sets are applicable across a diverse range of professional sectors, and interfaith training can also help students discern which career paths to pursue.

- ▶ Students involved in undergraduate interfaith programming pursue any number of **diverse career paths.** Within IFYC’s alumni network, the top 5 professional sectors that students pursue after graduation include the Nonprofit Sector, Higher Education, Religious and Intentionally Secular Communities, and Youth Services/Development/Leadership. Other popular career paths include Civic Advocacy, K-12 Education, Healthcare, Public Health, Law, and Marketing/Media/Communications.

“Employers in my line of work look for people who can navigate a diverse set of spaces, and people who can build relationships with diverse constituents. My involvement in interfaith has helped me develop all of those skills.” – Mustafa A., American Civil Liberties Union

- ▶ The majority of young professionals and graduate students who participated in undergraduate interfaith programming (76%) agree that **interfaith work has influenced their career objectives.**

“I was first introduced to global health through interfaith activism and my experiences have shown me the power that faith has as motivation for social justice.” – Avi S., Open Society Foundations

CONCLUSION

Through the perspectives of both employers and young professionals, this resource has explored the ways in which interfaith skill sets and competencies are beneficial in a diverse range of career settings. Employers have identified the fact that interfaith skill sets are useful, yet employees are not often given the opportunity to formally receive this training in the workplace itself. Young professionals who have received undergraduate interfaith training also claim to be leveraging these skill sets both on-the-job and in their job searches. From both of these perspectives, a strong argument can be made for spaces within higher education—both curricular and co-curricular—to equip students with interfaith skill sets and competencies before entering the job market.