

E Pluribus Unum: Embracing and Enacting 'Unity in Diversity' through Interbelief Dialogue

Project Description:

"*E Pluribus Unum*" (Out of Many, One) symbolizes the American value of unity in a diverse society. However, recent events such as the rise of ISIS, biased portrayal of specific religious communities in the media, and polarizing rhetoric of political candidates (e.g., Trump's anti-Muslim message) have led to friction and tension between people of differing beliefs and backgrounds. Unfortunately, the discourse that surrounds us today emphasizes what differentiates us (e.g., Muslims from Christians and Jews, Protestants from Catholics, believers from non-believers, etc.) while overlooking the common values that unite us.

To counter the polarizing rhetoric and create a more open and thriving multicultural community with greater appreciation for its diversity and commonalities on campus and in Manhattan, we propose a series of interbelief dialogues, which actively engage K-State students and members of the larger community. The purpose of these dialogues is to increase the understanding of and respect for different belief systems, enhance appreciation of their values, and minimize prejudice, which leads to finding areas of similarities and common ground. Although it is similar to interfaith dialogue in its philosophy and process, interbelief dialogue includes individuals with various religious beliefs as well as those who do not conform to any mainstream religious tradition.

While the U.S. prides itself as a religiously diverse nation, religious illiteracy is one of the greatest challenges it faces (Prothero, 2007). This is a grave concern because studies indicate one's knowledge about a religion correlates with positive attitudes toward that religion (Patel & Meyer, 2011). For instance, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2007) found people who knew less about Islam were more likely to hold negative views of it. We argue that there is a significant need for interbelief dialogue in our community. While our university and the larger community continue to attract diverse population from around the world, there is no Religious Studies major/minor offered at K-State, which limits the opportunity to learn about different religious traditions/belief systems. Further, although there are many student organizations that focus on diversity and specific religious background, these groups rarely come together to promote interbelief dialogue. Given our increasingly diverse population and adherence to the Principles of Community (k-state.edu/about/community.html) as well as to combat the current discursive environment that attempts to divide us based on different belief systems, we believe that it is timely and crucial to bring together and engage our students and community members in a respectful and productive interbelief dialogue.

Engagement Activities:

KSU researchers and community partners will work together to conduct **two interbelief dialogues in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017** involving the K-State community and the larger Manhattan community members. To that end, we will first **create an educational video** comprising interviews about peoples' belief/faith traditions, personal values and experiences, which will serve as a framework for the interbelief dialogue. Second, in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, we will **train students in intercultural communication courses (taught by PIs of this project) to become facilitators of the interbelief dialogue**. Students will apply the knowledge and skills learned in class (e.g., key concepts in intercultural communication and dialogue, the interactional dynamics between individuals with different worldviews, etc.) to facilitate interbelief dialogues involving the K-State community and the larger Manhattan community in November 2016 and April 2017. Through these service learning experience and interbelief dialogue, we aim to increase knowledge and understanding of different belief/faith traditions, enhance appreciation for different values, and create a more open and interconnected community. We will also administer pre- and post-surveys to **measure the impact of the service learning and community dialogue**, record and analyze a

select sample of small group dialogue to provide context to our data; then, use the data and the overall experience to **publish peer-reviewed journal articles and design effective classroom/community dialogue**. To sustain this effort and extend it to the larger Kansas community through complementary ventures (creation of online dialogue platforms/social media, on-campus groups/chapters, community organizations, etc.), we will use this project as a stepping stone to **seek funding through the Kansas Humanities Council** (Humanities Grants) and **the National Endowment for the Humanities** (The Common Good: The Humanities in the Public Square grant).

Objectives: Through this project, we hope to accomplish the following objectives:

Instructional/Pedagogical - Provide forum for students to apply knowledge of intercultural communication in the context of different belief/faith traditions and develop leadership skills to facilitate interbelief dialogue to create bridges within K-State and the larger community.

Community Engagement - Work with on-campus and community partners to raise awareness and knowledge of diverse belief systems, find commonalities among people in our community, and engage citizens of K-State and the larger community to create a thriving, multicultural community.

Research/Knowledge Distribution - Create and distribute new knowledge on interbelief dialogue and service learning through peer-reviewed journal articles, classroom/community lectures, and grant work.

Sustainability - Sustain interbelief dialogues (through the creation of online dialogue platforms/social media, on-campus groups/chapters, community organizations, etc.) on-campus, within the Manhattan community, and the larger Kansas community by seeking extramural funding.

Timeline:

May 2016-August 2016 - Conduct preliminary interviews and small group conversations with K-State faculty, students, and Manhattan community members to create an educational video. Discuss project logistics and organization of the interbelief dialogue with collaborators. Reach out to other potential on-campus partners (e.g., ICDD, Leadership Studies, Office of Student Life, Diversity Programming Committee, Student Organizations, etc.) to solicit their involvement in the community dialogue.

September 2016-November 2016 - Train students (in intercultural communication courses) to be effective facilitators of the interbelief dialogue. Work with on-campus and community partners to conduct one interbelief dialogue in November 2016. Administer surveys to measure the impact of the service learning experience and community dialogue.

December 2016-January 2017 - Analyze data and share the findings and implications for future dialogue with on-campus and community partners. Prepare a manuscript for publication based on the data collected. Work on fine-tuning logistics and the process of interbelief dialogue for Spring 2017.

February 2017-April 2017 - Follow the procedure outlined above for "September 2016-November 2016", and conduct the second interbelief dialogue in April 2017.

May 2017-August 2017 - Analyze data and share the findings and implications for future dialogue with on-campus and community partners. Prepare a second manuscript for publication. Develop and submit grant proposals to the Kansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Submit a final report to CECD.

Accomplishment Benchmarks:

- 1) Creation of an educational video on different belief/faith traditions, personal values and experiences that addresses the issue of diversity and unity in our community;
- 2) Successful training of students in intercultural communication courses (approx. 50 students each semester) and facilitation of two interbelief dialogues in November 2016 and April 2017;
- 3) Enhanced awareness and understanding of different belief systems among on-campus members and the larger community;

- 4) Increased engagement, efficacy, agency, and sense of community among students and community members involved in interbelief dialogue;
- 5) Distribution of new knowledge on interbelief dialogue and service learning among various communities (e.g., Manhattan community, K-State community, scholarly community, etc.); and
- 6) Development of grant proposals for the Kansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities to sustain interbelief dialogues and other complementary efforts on-campus and in the larger Kansas community.

Collaborative Partners:

K-State Faculty/Researchers

Soo-Hye Han (PI) – Dr. Han is an assistant professor of Communication Studies at K-State and a research associate at the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy. She will offer her expertise in public deliberation and dialogue to the project.

Soumia Bardhan (PI) – Dr. Bardhan is assistant professor of Communication Studies and affiliate faculty, department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at K-State. She will contribute her expertise in intercultural/religious communication and intercultural dialogue to the project.

Both PIs will work with collaborative partners to ensure involvement of all parties and train students to be effective facilitators of interbelief dialogue.

Community Partners:

The Ecumenical Campus Ministry at K-State – ECM focuses on efforts of Christians to bring religious and non-religious young adults to seek and celebrate things that unite people of different faith/beliefs.

The Islamic Center of Manhattan – ICM serves the Muslim community through a *masjid* (mosque) to perform their five daily prayers, Friday congregational service and prayer, a library, classes for Children's Islamic school, a social area, and other Islamic cultural activities.

The Manhattan Jewish Congregation – MJC is the only organized Jewish congregation in the city where congregants conduct all Shabbat and holiday services. It values openness of ideas, traditions, and skills of its members.

K-State Collaborators

Presidential Committee on Religion – Reports to the Vice President for Student Life and formulates University religious guidelines and coordinates religious activities and dialogue in a pluralistic community.

Potential impact for all collaborative parties:

This initiative will create a series of substantive opportunities for the community/K-State partners to fulfill their mission and further identify and develop their network of partners/collaborators, both on campus and the larger community, as well as minimize stereotypes associated with the faith/community they represent. This project will also produce new knowledge about interbelief dialogue and service learning, which K-State researchers can use to design future class and community lectures/dialogues, and generate grant proposals and publications.

Amount of funding requested & matching funds:

Total costs related to principle investigators' stipend, production of an educational video, dialogue hosting, honorarium, and data collection come to \$10,977.00. The Department of Communication Studies has agreed to provide \$1,000.00 in matching funds, which can cover dialogue hosting. With current matching funds, this proposal requests \$9,977.00.