

Engagement Incentive Grants Final Report

Project: “E Pluribus Unum: Embracing and Enacting ‘Unity in Diversity’ through Interbelief Dialogue”

PIs: Soo-Hye Han, Associate Professor and Soumia Bardhan, Assistant Professor
Communication Studies

I. Summary of activity

a. Thesis of project or need addressed

“*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 news media, and polarizing rhetoric of politicians 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 on campus and in Manhattan, we conducted a series of interbelief dialogues, which actively engaged K-State students and members of the larger community. The purpose of these dialogues was 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.

b. Location of project

Manhattan, Kansas

c. Length of project

Two years (2017-2018)

d. What type of action(s) did your project take?

i. Teaching (service learning)

Students in intercultural communication courses (taught by PIs) were trained to become facilitators of the interbelief dialogues. Students applied 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 Spring 2017 and Spring 2018. Through these service-learning experiences, students learned the techniques and skill of dialogue facilitation, gained knowledge and understanding of different belief/faith traditions, and enhanced appreciation for different values for our students.

ii. Scholarly research

We administered pre- and post-dialogue surveys to students to measure the impact of the service learning and community dialogues. We also recorded and transcribed the dialogue sessions for two article-length manuscripts. Currently, we are in the process of analyzing data.

iii. Training

As stated above, students were trained to facilitate Interbelief dialogues.

e. Who were the project partners?

i. University and Extension partners

- Presidential Committee on Religion
- Institute for Civic and Discourse and Democracy (ICDD)

ii. Community partners

- **ECM** – The Ecumenical Campus Ministry at K-State 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.
- **ICM** – A non-profit, the Islamic Center of Manhattan serves the Muslim community through a *masjid* (mosque) to perform their five daily prayers, a library, classes for Children’s Islamic school and a social area, and other Islamic cultural activities.
- **MJC** – The Manhattan Jewish Congregation 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.

f. In general, what roles did each partner play?

The Presidential Committee on Religion connected us to potential panel speakers for our dialogue. A representative from ICDD offered training sessions for students to facilitate interbelief dialogue. ECM provided their facility to conduct practice sessions

for interbelief dialogue and helped us recruit participants for the interbelief dialogue. Both ICM and MJC connected us to potential panel speakers.

II. What were the impacts of your work?

a. Juried essays / book chapters / conference presentations

We have presented preliminary findings from our project at the International Communication Association's annual conference in Prague in May, 2018. The presentation was titled: "Engaging Students through Interbelief Dialogue and Facilitation." We are currently analyzing the data obtained from our pre- and post-surveys and transcripts from a series of interbelief dialogue for two journal-length articles (*Communication Education* and *Journal of Religion and Communication*).

b. New teaching areas or techniques

We will incorporate few new techniques to our dialogue training sessions for our students based on the lessons learned. For instance, increase the number of training sessions, add more scholarly reading material that focus on the importance and implications of organizing dialogue and deliberation events in cross-cultural contexts, etc.

c. Community or organizational changes

i. Capacity built to continue work?

After our interbelief dialogue in 2018, we worked with Rev. Jonalu Johnstone (Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Manhattan) and Susanne Glymour (Manhattan Nonviolence Initiative) to continue interbelief dialogue in the city of Manhattan. Junalu and Susanne are heading a group called "Inter-belief MHK" and organizing several events to promote interbelief dialogue. We are also working with several campus and community partners to invite Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, to Manhattan, KS in an effort to involve a greater number of students and community members in continued interbelief dialogue on campus and beyond.

III. Self-assessment of your project

a. Successes

1. Successful training of students in intercultural communication courses (approx. 50 students each semester) and facilitation of two interbelief dialogues.
2. Enhanced awareness and understanding of different belief systems among on-campus members and the larger Manhattan community.

3. Increased engagement and efficacy among students and community members involved in interbelief dialogue.
4. Distribution of new knowledge on interbelief dialogue and service learning among various communities (e.g., Manhattan community, K-State community, scholarly community through conference presentation).

b. Challenges

1. Involving greater Manhattan community members when the dialogue sessions were scheduled on-campus. The problem of 'town and gown' separation.
2. Scheduling conflict. Several campus events conflicted with the dialogues. It was difficult finding ways to involve more K-State and Manhattan community members (including students from other courses) to participate in these sessions.
3. Students' facilitation skills affecting the richness, rigor, and depth of the conversations.
4. Inability to gauge the authenticity with which participants were sharing their stories, experiences, and information, as is often the case with dialogue projects focused on religion/belief-based identity positions, especially when a sense of community and familiarity is not already established. Thus, sustaining these initiatives within a community through more dialogue sessions and other events becomes expedient.