

**WCU Interfaith, Meaning-Making, and Spirituality Project (IMMSP) Launch
End-of-Year Report (2022-2023)**

Project Leadership

Program Director Contact Information

Zachary C. Wooten, Ph.D. (Faculty)
703 S. High Street, Room 205
(484) 639-9243
zwooten@wcupa.edu

Program Co-Director Contact Information

Matthew Pierlott, Ph.D. (Faculty)
Anderson Hall 224
(215) 913-2877
mpierlott@wcupa.edu

Summary of the Program

Per our mission statement, WCU develops graduates to contribute to the common good, in part by helping students effectively and participate in civic discourse and engage inclusively in a diverse society. Per our values statement, WCU faculty and staff affirm the worth and dignity of each member and the shared responsibility of all to treat each other as individuals, with respect and courtesy.

To further enact our mission and values, this project developed a sustainable network of faculty, staff, students, and community members who support the diverse ways students orient around religious and philosophical worldviews in order to make meaning of their lives and connect to the world around them. Though interfaith efforts have been happening organically in various sectors of campus, this project brought these efforts together collaboratively under an increasingly formalized structure to support and celebrate interfaith leadership. The project will continue into the 2023-2024 academic year, building upon the success of the work done so far, with gratitude for the support from the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Impact to WCU Campus

As per the project proposal, we were successful in accomplishing our stated goals. We built a network of faculty, staff, and students committed to interfaith leadership and leadership efforts exploring spirituality and meaning-making. We convened bi-weekly meetings of the **Faculty and Staff Interfaith Advisory Board**, consisting of 24 members (14 faculty from 11 different departments/4 colleges, and 8 staff across 6 offices). The board supported the growth of the **Student Interfaith Action Committee**, which brought together student leaders from a number of student clubs focused on faith, religion or spirituality. The network of stakeholders developed collaborative goals and initiatives for activities at WCU related to interfaith collaboration, meaning-making, and spirituality, supported by the student **Interfaith Leadership Fellows**, student workers trained in interfaith leadership and working closely with the directors. WCU community members gained an increased sense of community across lines of difference through the expansion of interfaith efforts on campus, implemented by the interfaith network described above. By increasing students' cultural competence related to religious, philosophical,

and worldview differences, students involved in this programming were better prepared to work toward the common good within a diverse community during their time at WCU and beyond.

Program Highlights

The IMMSP Team celebrates several highlights from its initiatives within the past year, including:

Student Development

Six students served as inaugural **Interfaith Leadership Fellows** during the 2022-2023 academic year. These students were enrolled in degree programs spanning fields including education, foreign language, music, political science, accounting, and management and including at least one first-year student, sophomore, junior, and senior. Three students continued work through the summer. Several of these students collaborated with the Office of Wellness Promotion to support their Be Well Hunt event focused on spirituality. One student, the Interfaith Action Committee Chairperson, used his training from the Interfaith Leadership Institute hosted by Interfaith America to create new campus partnerships such as with the Office of Off-Campus and Commuter Services and shared what he learned with the fellows, committee, and advisory board.

Events/Programming

The Faculty and Staff Advisory Board and Interfaith Leadership Fellows worked together to support the third annual **Better Together Day** celebration. This included a student leader networking event in partnership with the Office for Student Leadership and Involvement, a campus and community organization tabling event, and a speaker event featuring Off-Campus Hillel Jewish Student Union Advisor, Jenn Reiss.

Additionally, the Faculty and Staff Advisory Board and Interfaith Leadership Fellows worked to organize an **Interfaith Consortium** speaker event, although this was unfortunately canceled at the last minute due to the speaker's sudden unavailability. However, we hosted an alternative event in which students, faculty, and staff gathered for refreshments and Q&A with interfaith faculty, staff, and student leaders as well as idea generation for interfaith efforts on campus.

Formalization of Interfaith Infrastructure

The Faculty & Staff Interfaith Advisory Board as well as the two student inclusive initiatives collaboratively developed mission statements. For instance, the Advisory Board's mission statement is: *The WCU Faculty & Staff Advisory Board exists to advocate for and holistically support West Chester University students, faculty, and staff as a means of building cultural competence and working for the common good. We do this by fostering religious pluralism as part of our understanding of diversity and inclusion while addressing xenophobia as well as both reducing and preventing harm.*

Media/Communications

A new website was launched as an electronic landing spot for all efforts related to the project. (See: <https://www.wcupa.edu/interfaith/>). This website will continue to expand and serve to advertise existing interfaith events hosted by project team leaders and others on campus. Events and initiatives advertised via flyers, Instagram, television screens across campus, a [WCU quad article](#), and tabling events.

Engagement of Broader Community

We had 15 campus and community partners participate in a tabling event during the week of our Better Together Day celebration. These partners represent various religious communities and organizations in our area, and are interested in cooperative and respectful dialogue and education around issues of religion, spirituality and meaning.

After beginning conversations with Julie Dietrich, the Executive Director of WCU's Office of External Relations, we connected with former PA State Senator Andy Dinnamin to support the work of his The Together Endowment, which sponsors and supports programs that work for the respect and dignity of all through innovative strategies, dialogue, and interactive engagement. We participated in the inaugural The Together Gathering event, and anticipate an ongoing relationship with his work.

Challenges of the Program:

One of the challenges we experienced was the last-minute cancellation on the part of our Consortium speaker. This delay simply means we will plan our inaugural consortium for next year. Another challenge is not having a dedicated space for interfaith work that is open for general student use and serves as a visual marker on campus of the welcoming space we hope to foster. An advisory board member, Prof. Don McCown, Director of the Center for Contemplative Studies, has offered use of his space when available and appropriate for future events and activities, which is very helpful. The goal would still be to have dedicated welcoming space on campus open to students throughout the day.

Narrative description of the budget spending:

Our initiative received a total \$5,000.00 budget. \$1,500.00 in dual compensation sustained activity of the program director over the year. \$1,095.86 of the originally allotted \$1,225.00 was used to send a student leader to the Interfaith Leadership Institute, hosted by Interfaith America in Chicago, IL in August of 2022. Additionally, \$275.00 was allotted for training of new Advisory Board members, of which we spent \$264.99. The \$2000 consortium estimate was drawn from comparison to the Spirituality and Sustainability Colloquium co-sponsored by the Philosophy Department. Due to the cancellation, only \$238.88 was used for food as it was non-refundable. An impromptu socializing event with students, faculty and staff planning to attend the consortium was organized to make sure not to waste the food. We have requested that our remaining funds be used to purchase items for student recruitment and raising of

awareness of our initiative at campus events for the upcoming year. These items were not part of our original request, but will be part of our efforts moving forward and support our primary mission of building a sustainable infrastructure for interfaith efforts on campus.

Additional Support: Additional financial support for interfaith efforts came from Interfaith America, the Honors Student Association, and the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. The Philosophy Department and the Office for Off-Campus Commuter Services also financially supported interfaith events. Financial Aid contributed through the utilization of Federal Work Study funds for the Interfaith Leadership Fellowship compensation.

Sustainability

The purpose of this project was to bring together current work and build new structures to support campus partners. The Interfaith Action Committee was already an active student group on campus, supporting the Better Together Day annual event and connecting several campus constituencies. As a student-initiated working group, this work continued to grow through faculty and staff support as well as through new peer support via the Interfaith Leadership Fellows. The HON 382 course focusing on interfaith leadership has continued to grow and serve as a regular course offering, generating new students interested in furthering interfaith activities on campus and would likely provide future leaders to contribute to the work of the Interfaith Action Committee.

The Interfaith Leadership Fellows will maintain support from the Philosophy Department. The Fellows will continue to work closely with the student committee and the advisory board, providing structural support to ensure that the activities and initiatives of this collaboration will have a home and continue with faculty, staff and student participation.

Our partnerships in the community will be maintained and expanded. Moreover, the maintenance and development of the website will continue into the coming academic year as part of the project's external communication and growing resource depository.