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IIT tackles presidential challenge for interfaith service

By Utsav Gandhi
CAMPUS EDITOR

Out of 4000+ colleges in the United States, it is gratifying to know that IIT is one of 200-odd who responded to the President's Interfaith Challenge. The White House is launching the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, an initiative inviting institutions of higher education to commit to a year of interfaith and community service programming on campus. On the 3rd of August, Lynne Meyer, Director of Spiritual Life and Service Learning at IIT; and Leroy Kennedy, Vice President for Community Affairs and Outreach Programs for IIT, were invited to the White House for a day of networking with other institutions who had responded successfully to the President's Challenge. TechNews was able to contact Lynne and discuss the exciting project.

How is president Obama different from his predecessors in his vision of interfaith community service?

The Obama family in general have had huge exposure to community service, living in our very own city of Chicago. For example, as Associate Dean of Student Services, the First Lady developed the University of Chicago's first community service program, and under her leadership as Vice President of Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center, volunteerism skyrocketed. President Obama laying emphasis on interfaith community service is hardly surprising and makes perfect sense since in his inaugural address itself he had acknowledged, being one of the first Presidents in doing so, that the USA is essentially a culturally diverse nation – and more than that, a religiously diverse nation. Presidents before him, though initiating service projects like the Peace Corps, have not shown as much interest as he has in unifying faith and service.

Why is this the right time for such

an initiative and why do college campuses play such an important role?

College campuses have a history of being at the forefront of many large-scale service programs, going as far back as the Civil Rights Movement. Youth have the energy, passion and ideas which are required to bring about change in the world. They are the leaders of tomorrow and can apply the lessons they learn in school, both inside and outside the classroom, without worrying about commitments that people have after graduating from college.

As for the question of why now is an excellent time for interfaith service on college campuses, well, it's actually always been important. However, now the world is getting smaller and smaller. There are no more borders and we are starting to develop close contact with people from different backgrounds, faiths, values, beliefs and cultures. If we are going to be wishing to peacefully coexist with so many cultures, it is imperative that we make an honest effort to understand other cultures too.

What is IIT's potential in playing its part in this project? Why do you think this is particularly relevant to the IIT campus?

IIT has a long history of participation in community service activities, efforts and outreach programs. ASB, the Big Event and Greek Service activities are only some of the long-standing service activities that have become a tradition at IIT. The students may not be speaking about it, but when it's the day to show their participation, they are surely there in large numbers. We take our incredible diversity for granted (40% of our students are from outside the US, with our student body representing approximately 100 countries) – but we need to know that this is a great strength, and a feat that many, many other college campuses are jealous of! Additionally, we are a good neighbor to the communities of Bronzeville and Bridgeport; and the city of Chicago in general.

What are the partner offices, student orgs and institutions who have agreed to support? What will their participation be?

I was very pleased with the kind of response I received from most of the offices, student orgs and administrative offices I approached for support while drafting the proposal. Offices such as the Student Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Office of the President and Provost, the Community Affairs Office, International Center, OSL, Health Services, CMC, HRS, OCES, Mies Society; along with sister campuses Shimer and VanderCook, and even other departments such as Athletics, whom you wouldn't associate with my Office a lot, came forward to offer support and participation. My job is to lead, co-ordinate and facilitate this initiative on campus and it feels to have so much support, not just from religious groups.

What are the upcoming events students should look forward to on campus? How do you see the action around this component contributing to the broader campus movement for interfaith cooperation?

As for now, look forward to Fast to Feed! An annual event organized by the Muslim Students Association wherein they invite non-Muslim students to fast with them for a day; just to appreciate food as a blessing which many do not enjoy; this year will be an interfaith event with representatives from different faiths.

What do you think will be the impact of this kind of initiative on the IIT Campus in particular?

Now, even before the launch of programming, the Muslim Student Association, Hillel, and Catholic Campus Ministry are already planning events together and have pledged to support one another's projects; InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has eagerly signed on to participate in the Challenge, as has our Atheists and Allies student organization; and our GLBT student group is working with Catholic Campus Ministry. Participating in the President's Challenge is going to inaugurate a new era of cooperation and learning on our campus, and will accomplish the breakdown of multiple stereotypes, including one prevalent stereotype at IIT which afflicts all

faith groups: the assumption that one cannot be a person of faith and still be a good scientist. The President's Challenge should lessen the distrust and misinformation that exists between the religious and non-religious groups on campus, as well as between faith groups. It will excite more students to join service initiatives – and that too, not just for a resume or to satisfy society requirements.

What do you think will be the effect if more classes are offered (as Humanities/SS electives) or more panels and discussions are held which will encourage positive interfaith understanding and cooperation?

They have to be handled the right way, as there is great potential for students coming out more confused and more misunderstood than before. At a technical institute, it will be hard to dispel the belief that science is good and religion isn't; but it needs to be done – to create more culturally aware students. It's too important to not talk about!

How do you plan to keep this initiative sustainable?

By asking service participants to identify which student organization(s), if any, they represent and to (voluntarily) identify which, if any, faith group they are affiliated with, we hope to track the degree of involvement of each population. This will allow us to further cultivate the strongest relationships, and identify ways to strengthen those that are weakest, and to ensure that as many different voices as possible are heard and involved. Working with the leadership of the various student organizations/offices/community partners, we will create in each one a sense of excitement and enthusiasm that will extend to the future leaders; by making this program something that students value and get excited about, and by involving them directly in the planning process, we will give them the ownership required for them to take aspects of the project on in subsequent years. This also encourages diverse groups to continue to work together.

This interview was conducted shortly before Fast To Feed, referenced here, took place.



Photo courtesy of Marya Spont