

“Developing Interfaith Encounters as High Impact Educational Practices”  
Wabash Center Undergraduate Department Grant Final Report  
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**1) The presenting question/focus of the grant**

Our department is enhancing and institutionalizing engaged learning practices focused on interreligious encounter. How can our department develop interreligious encounters as an engaged learning practice in a liberal arts context? In other words, how can we improve our delivery of a certain form of learning experience (“High Impact Learning Experiences” or HILE), which might include 1) extended site visits, 2) study abroad or away, 3) undergraduate research, 4) service learning and 5) internships, that is congruent with our department’s culture and trends in higher education in general, and that also deepens a certain content of learning experience (interfaith or interreligious encounter)? Finally, how can we change our department’s culture in the long-term?

**2) Brief description of what you did**

Five out of the nine faculty in our department chose to become part of a High Impact Working Group (HIWG). The HIWG were assigned reading and met regularly to discuss. Each of us on HIWG formally proposed to incorporate a high impact learning experience (HILE) involving interreligious encounter into one of the classes they were teaching in Academic Year 2016-17. (Overnight or all-day stays at religious institutions.) One HIWG member also organized a very successful summer study abroad trip to India. Funding allowed the 12 students who participated to receive some pre-training on interreligious encounters. Another member created for a brand-new class, “Interfaith Atlanta Across the Color Line.” We funded student activities related to the mission of the grant, including food for meetings, travel costs for training. Our March 2017 summative conference was an opportunity for us to disseminate our results and celebrate our accomplishments within the College and the community but also to provide a final evaluation experience.

**3) What you learned overall in relation to your question**

Our goal that every Religious Studies major would have experienced at least one interfaith HILE by the time they graduate was more or less met, as was the expectation that majors would highly value these experiences—that was the easy part! What was harder to measure, we learned, was whether our changes would be recognized by the upper administration. So publicity needs to be a factor in any teaching project, especially in light of the crisis in the humanities on most college campuses. Some of our most successful events were interfaith activities that cost very little in funding (and indeed were not a line item in our original budget) but generated a lot of positive media! Finally we learned that changing our department’s culture takes food, robust conversation, reading common texts, but it also will take hiring new faculty when our senior colleagues retire, and not losing tenure-track lines!