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Better Together: Considering Student Interfaith Leadership and Social Change

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Abstract

On campuses across the country, students and professional staff are considering student interfaith leadership as one way that students act on their core values to make a positive difference in the world. This kind of student leadership can be framed through student leadership models like the social change model of leadership development. Better Together, a national campaign for student interfaith leadership, draws heavily on this leadership model to offer a framework specific to student interfaith leadership. The authors of this article describe interfaith leadership using a leadership development model with which many higher education professionals are familiar.

One of the major dilemmas confronting any modern democratic society is how to reconcile the twin values individualism and community. . . . Is it really possible to achieve true collaboration within a highly diverse group without sacrificing the individuality of its members? (HERI, 1996, p. 4)

The idea is that serving others is a common value to all traditions—including secular ones—and when religiously diverse young people engage in volunteer projects together, they become both committed to the cause of interfaith cooperation and the ambassadors of its importance. (Patel, 2012, pp. xi-xii)

In recent years, the field of student leadership has sharpened its assertion of the link between leadership and social change, emphasizing the complex interplay between individual and group leadership. Whether within a formal student leadership program or a loosely affiliated networking group, the leadership process aims to achieve a set of desired outcomes. Models like the relational leadership model define leadership as “a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013, p. 7), and the social change model of leadership development (SCM) “approaches leadership as a purposeful, collaborative, and values-based process that results in positive change” (HERI, 1996).

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Interfaith leadership is also inherently about social change. Interfaith leaders look for ways to disrupt negative narratives around religious difference and challenge the status quo of disengagement. With the end goal of affecting knowledge, attitudes, and relationships, the key outcomes of interfaith leadership, interfaith leaders work together with those who are different from them to achieve positive societal change. Our colleagues have written about interfaith leadership in this column in recent years, and we draw implicitly on their ideas in this article (Patel & Meyer, 2009, 2011).

Students are demonstrating interfaith leadership on campus more and more frequently. For example, at California Lutheran University, students coordinated a campus-wide effort to amend the language of the student government constitution to be more inclusive of non-Lutherans. At Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, the student interfaith organization on campus played a significant role in advocating for campus policies more inclusive to the nonreligious. These students are part of Better Together, a national student leadership program for interfaith social action. Students organize peers from different religious and nonreligious backgrounds to take action on issues of common concern, such as hunger, mental health, and human trafficking. We consider this form of student action as we frame an approach to student interfaith leadership.

**Social Change Model**

For the purposes of situating the Better Together framework (described in the following section) within the broader conversation of student leadership development, we are interested in exploring how Better Together—as a leadership program—aligns with the SCM, one of the most common leadership models currently in use by student affairs professionals. The SCM in particular speaks to our understanding of leadership, as it provides a framework for individuals and groups to learn to engage in leadership for social change (HERI, 1996). Developed in the early 1990s by Alexander and Helen Astin along with a team of leadership specialists and student affairs professionals, the SCM is a model of college student development that focuses on the knowledge, values, or skills students need to develop in order to participate in effective leadership focused on social change (Wagner, 2006).

![Figure 1. Social change model of leadership development.](source)

We will frame our discussion around the core values of the SCM—including individual, group, and community values—centered on the seven C’s of the model: (a) consciousness of self, (b) congruence, (c) commitment, (d) collaboration, (e) common purpose, (f) controversy with civility, and (g) citizenship (HERI, 1996). The purpose of this article is not to describe the SCM in great detail, but rather to point to the elements of interfaith leadership that are demonstrative of the model in practice.

**Better Together Framework**

These are the kinds of questions Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC, n.d.) and our college and university partners were asking as Better Together was forming:

- How can a unified national movement both advance and embody a positive narrative about religious difference, while deeply situating within the unique context of an individual campus?
- What kind of interfaith leadership program could encourage mass mobilization of young interfaith leaders without compromising the quality of the students’ experience or the effectiveness of their work?

Designed to provide both breadth of reach and depth of quality, Better Together serves as a national network of students leading interfaith projects on their campuses and as a student leadership program. The structure is unique to each campus, but the challenge is the same: for students to create spaces for people to

- **voice** their religious or nonreligious values,
- **engage** with others across lines of religious difference, and
- **act** together for the common good through social action and service.

This three-part framework guides students’ application of *interfaith leadership*, a term that can be difficult to define using simple and concrete language.

The three parts of the framework are not sequential and often intertwine; in fact, they work best when in coordination with each other. In this model, the strongest interfaith projects are those that foster intentional, meaningful interactions between participants; create space for rich conversations around what inspires us from our backgrounds and traditions; and focus on action that impacts the common good.

No prescribed organizational structure exists across Better Together groups. Some students run interfaith groups focused on dialogue and relationship building among students, while others opt for a formal interfaith council that collaborates with different religious and intentionally secular organizations to plan large-scale service projects. We encourage students to be intentional about their organization strategies, and, regardless of structure, leadership should always be collaborative and focused on action.

**Voice, Engage, Act, and the SCM**

As we look at how the *voice, engage*, and *act* framework aligns with the SCM, we will examine the story of one particular student leader who has been part of Better Together since its inception:

In her first year at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN, the college’s chaplain approached Noor Eltayech to lead a new interfaith program called “Better Together.” At first, Noor was unsure about leading an interfaith program instead of focusing on her own Muslim faith. While attending an Interfaith Leader-
ship Institute (ILI), Noor heard other students tell the stories of their motivations to build interfaith cooperation and began to see beauty in other faith traditions and backgrounds. Additionally, she learned to articulate her own religious values and was challenged to explore the history and richness of her tradition, and how it called her to engage with those of different faith or philosophical identities.

Over the course of the next year, Noor and other student leaders used Better Together to launch a series of events at Rhodes to provide space for the meaningful interactions that they experienced at the ILI. Projects ranged from awareness-raising events about minority faith experiences to large-scale social action projects that raised money for local hunger-based initiatives. During interfaith dialogue or reflection, they were intentional about fostering a safe space for honest conversation while also focusing on dialogue, not debate. Throughout their planning, students focused on establishing relationships with each of the religious and intentionally secular student organizations on campus. They invited each organization to send representatives to lead Better Together projects; no student had a titled position, instead, the group took collective responsibility for the success of the projects. Though this structure allowed many students to take part in leadership, at times it led to a lack of accountability for responsibilities. Sometimes Noor had to approach certain students about why they were not fulfilling the tasks to which they had committed. She approached these individuals through one-on-one conversation, seeking to find solutions to the issues while protecting their relationship.

Better Together grew in scale over the next few years, focusing many service projects on the food insecurity needs of the broader Memphis community. One project in particular challenged students to donate the money they would have spent on their meals in one day to a local hunger initiative. This project evolved into a sustainable event year over year that brought in over $1,000. Noor believed these kinds of events were important because not only did they create space to build more interfaith relationships, but they also challenged students to see beyond their immediate schoolwork. Noor leaned on her own story as a Muslim woman at a predominantly Christian institution, intentionally built relationship across lines of religious difference, and called her fellow students to the vision of a more inclusive campus for those of diverse faiths and worldviews.

In Noor’s story, we see both Better Together and the SCM in action. We would like to explore how the Better Together framework and the SCM’s seven C’s complement one another. Our hope is that the following section will make it apparent that this form of leadership is something that can be developed using established leadership development models.

**Voice: Individual Values—Consciousness of Self, Congruence, Commitment**

We encourage young interfaith leaders to begin with themselves by reflecting on the values they carry from their religious, spiritual, or secular worldviews that motivate them to serve their communities. The language of values is used in interfaith work intentionally as a way to avoid a sense of relativism and focus on shared values rather than shared beliefs. At the same time, interfaith leadership does lean more heavily on the faith/meaning element of self-awareness described within the SCM (Fincher, 2009).

One way students “voice” is through personal storytelling, and it is often through the process of sharing their motivations to be interfaith leaders that students align their values with their leadership efficacy. The willingness to share these values in conversation with others is a means through which to build consciousness of self—defined within the SCM as an “awareness of personal beliefs, values, attitudes, and
emotions . . . [and] continual personal reflection” (Cilente, 2009, p. 54) around guiding values. Since one must know one’s values in order to “voice” them, having this element of interfaith leadership encourages self-reflection and exploration so that the leader can strive to meet students wherever they happen to be in their identity development. If we use Noor’s story as an example, we see that storytelling in her interfaith work presented the opportunity to explore her own Muslim faith in more depth and speak with confidence about the importance of interfaith cooperation for her as an individual and for the larger communities of which she is a part.

The elements of congruence, acting in a manner that reflects one’s values authentically, and commitment, passion, energy, and purposeful investment toward creating positive social change (Cilente, 2009, p. 54) in the SCM often work in tandem within the context of interfaith leadership. Commitment to being an interfaith leader is to live in congruence with the values that one voices and to serve as a conversation changer when encountering acts of religious intolerance or violence (Patel & Meyer, 2009). As Shalka (2009) points out, living in congruence takes courage; interfaith leaders often demonstrate courage in their leadership as they sometimes encounter skepticism, even downright disdain, for their interfaith activities.

As we see in Noor’s case, organizing events year after year was a reflection of her commitment to creating change through interfaith action and the congruence of living out her values by working with those of other faiths to contribute to the broader needs of the Memphis community.

### Engage: Group Values—Collaboration, Common Purpose, Controversy With Civility

Engaging with others purposefully around religious or secular values to build mutually inspiring relationships is the second element of the Better Together framework. It is, in essence, the ability to recognize and appreciate similarities among the values of different traditions while honoring their differences.

Better Together teams whose organizers operate as a cohesive whole drive change both on their campuses and within their communities. Collaboration, defined within the SCM as “a process of capitalizing on the diversity of group and in the relationships of its members through the change process” (Cilente, 2009, p. 54), is essential in planning campus-wide projects and facilitating interfaith relationships that are integral parts of Better Together organizing. Many students intuitively understand that team leadership is essential to successful programs, but the additional piece is that collaboration is an essential mechanism to build bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) between people of diverse religious backgrounds in order to strengthen communal ties.

Next, the common purpose (another core value of the SCM) of building and embodying interfaith cooperation is the underlying motivating factor in interfaith leadership. For example, we encourage Better Together teams to start their work together with a visioning exercise in which they describe what their campus would look like if interfaith cooperation were a norm. Establishing a common purpose “contributes to a high level of group trust, involving all participants in shared responsibility toward collective aims, values, and vision” (Cilente, 2009, p. 54). Thus, we encourage students to revisit their shared vision when planning projects and to return to it in times of difficulty.

Looking at the Rhodes students’ approach to leadership, we can observe an emphasis on collaboration and common purpose. Establishing explicit leadership positions and specialized responsibilities was not a priority; instead, they focused on building commitment toward a shared vision and ownership over each project. This style of leadership emphasized that leadership is not positional but is a process in which anyone can take part.
Finally, the core value *controversy with civility* is perhaps the most important element of maintaining healthy and meaningful engagement within a Better Together group, as interfaith dialogue is enriching but sometimes contentious. The ability to maintain a respectful rapport when confronting both the inherent conflicts that arise among groups (Cilente, 2009), and the irrevocable differences present in a religiously diverse group, is key for successful interfaith engagement. Controversy with civility is the ability of a group to create a space for open, critical, and civil discourse to lead to new and creative solutions to issues. The way in which Noor held her fellow students accountable to their responsibilities truly displays this value. Noor chose to approach individuals with a solutions-based approach and capitalized on the strong relationships between members of the group. Additionally, the events themselves captured this element when they fostered a space for intentional interfaith engagement. Many Better Together groups identify what are called “Safe Space” guidelines to guide their meetings and interfaith dialogues. Safe Space guidelines do not exempt a group from conflict or tension, but establish a shared commitment to hold each other accountable to respectful and empathic interactions.

**Act: Community Values—Citizenship**

The Act component of Better Together is what sets it apart from many other interfaith programs. With an emphasis on social action, “act” challenges students to understand the role that their different religious or nonreligious values play in the betterment of society. The idea of “acting” challenges students to engage in socially responsible leadership via active connection with their community, which the SCM also points to (Wagner, 2009).

By organizing their peers to take action together, students demonstrate the potential for bigger impact on some of the world’s most significant issues through interfaith cooperation (hence the name Better Together). Action takes interfaith cooperation out of the intellectual sphere into the world of community service and civic engagement (Patel & Meyer, 2011). As a result, this emphasis on concrete change serves to disrupt the narrative that people from different religious or nonreligious backgrounds are doomed to violence.

Similarly, citizenship, as articulated within the SCM, is a process of becoming responsibly connected to the community through activities and recognizing that the individual and community are interconnected (Komives et al., 2011). Better Together organizers are encouraged to determine the most pressing needs of their community and respond in accordance, rather than choose an action issue at random. Action at Rhodes occurred through planned, long-term projects as well as through periodic service opportunities. Their sustainable project to impact hunger in the Memphis area connected the power of interfaith cooperation with tangible needs in the community. As Noor noted, these events helped students identify with the broader community of which they were a part and develop a deeper level of awareness about the needs of others. The very nature in which Rhodes’s students approached their interfaith leadership as a coalition fostered a deeper sense of citizenship with the campus community as well.

**Conclusion**

We know that college students are craving opportunities to develop interfaith leadership, as the number of universities participating in Better Together has grown to over 150 campuses in 45 states. As more colleges and universities dedicate themselves to educating global leaders, interfaith leadership is an integral part of the equation.
There are many leadership development theories that reinforce the voice, engage, act framework, but the SCM also includes the emphasis on social change that drives IFYC’s work with college students. The purpose of leadership is to create positive social change; interreligious understanding in a time of global religious conflict is such a change. We call upon educators in the field to provide opportunities for students to develop interfaith leadership—to understand their own religious or nonreligious identity, engage with those different from them, and work together to create a better world.

References