

Do your DEI&B efforts ignore religious diversity?

Your school likely encourages applications from in-state, out-of-state, as well as from outside of the U.S., and welcomes all of those students with open arms. But how many of our institutions consider the varied *religious* backgrounds of both our international and domestic student populations? NACRAO's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee thought that December was an appropriate time to engage in some discussion about faith-related resources on our campuses, how policies and practices may affect students from various spiritual backgrounds, and how programming accommodations—or a lack thereof—ignore students' religious, secular, and spiritual identities. There is always trepidation about blurring any lines separating church and state; however, providing a safe space to discuss, understand, and bridge religious differences and acknowledging intersectionality is crucial in creating a sense of belonging. Consider that one of the main tenets of this country's founding, and indeed one of the focuses of the First Amendment, is the freedom to establish and practice a religion of choice or no religion at all.

Since it is December, the first place to start might be to assess your holiday decorations. Are they Christian-centric only? Without getting into partisan political rhetoric, perhaps an easy reframe is to change Christmas parties to holiday parties or end-of-the-semester/-year parties, and ensure that door-decorating or ornament-making contests are either neutral (e.g., winter theme) or inclusive (e.g., are there Hanukkah menorahs and the seven candles of Kwanzaa?).

Here are some positive steps reported by NACRAO member schools:

- UNO has a foot wash station and a nondenominational prayer room.
- Several schools expressed that they have robust heritage month celebrations (at least for certain months...) but observed that Hispanic students tend to be better represented overall as the largest minority population.
- CCC has a big weekend Día de los Muertos celebration with food trucks, music, catrin/catrina contests, sugar skull making, etc., and provides information boards in the Student Union for Chinese New Year.
- UNO's Multicultural Affairs office or student groups host different celebrations like Holi festivals and Day of the Dead ofrendas.
- WNCC has "wellness rooms" that can be used for nursing privacy, mental health breaks, or a prayer space, although they are not widely advertised. The college also has a room dedicated to multicultural groups and activities that is student-decorated and student-driven.
- UNO's Multicultural Affairs office sponsors food tours during heritage months, using locally-owned businesses from that specific demographic to provide lunch or a snack to any student, faculty, or staff to learn about culture through food. There are expos, art exhibits, and guest speakers that will come to campus.
- Food services on most campuses provide vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and dairy-free options.
- There are some instances of microaggression training that include religious examples, but they tend to be very surface-level.

These are areas that schools reported needed improvement:

- While larger schools have multicultural offices or departments to devote time to inclusivity, smaller schools struggle with the resources to focus on more than a few aspects of diversity. Sometimes at the larger schools, participation is limited and doesn't go beyond the multicultural office itself.
- Schools reported mixed responses to whether students are excused from class for their holidays if they don't coincide with Christian ones. Allowances are instructor-specific and not in school policy.
- Communication can always be improved; while schools may have a prayer space available, how many students are aware of it?

- Sometimes good initiatives lose momentum. Following the shooting and death of George Floyd, UNO offered a program called “Real Talk,” which provided a safe space open to faculty, staff, and students to openly discuss difficult topics, but it no longer exists.
- Several cited aspirations to be more inclusive with other cultures, religions, and holidays and noted that while Hispanic culture and holiday celebrations are the most widely celebrated because of larger representation on campus, others are mostly overlooked.

Other suggestions to take small steps to ensure religious and non-religious inclusivity:

- Confirm that accommodation policies for religious holidays appear on course syllabi and that students are excused from class/activities for religious observance needs.
- Monitor what kinds of religious iconography are in designated prayer rooms and holiday décor.
- Provide access to food during Ramadan (does the cafeteria stay open later than 8:00 or provide to-go options?) and food options for religiously prescribed diets (e.g., kosher or halal).
- Consider atheists and agnostics who may not feel they have space in an interfaith conversation (e.g., be aware that events taking place in religious spaces like chapels could be a potential source of discomfort for atheist students).
- Offer interreligious, interfaith, and worldview workshops to faculty and staff.
- Make mindful and informed scheduling decisions in consultation with an interfaith calendar (e.g., don’t schedule a major campus event or mandatory workshop on Rosh Hashana).

What does your school do? What suggestions do you have?

Contribute to the conversation by responding to all via NACRAO’s Listserv!



Above: WNCC provides many examples of recognizing and acknowledging different languages, especially with international student populations, but does not do as well including the religions and other cultural aspects of native speakers of those tongues.



Right: Another example of supporting international languages and flags from some of the student population on campus, but despite the variety of countries represented, the focus is still on the Christian holiday.

A few of the holidays your students may celebrate:

1. **Bodhi Day:** A Buddhist celebration of when the Buddha realized enlightenment. December 8.
2. **Christmas:** The celebration of Jesus' birth. December 25. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, January 7.
3. **Diwali:** A five-day Hindu celebration of the Festival of Lights. October 22-27, 2022. Say: "Happy Diwali," "Wishing you a Diwali that brings happiness, prosperity, and joy to you and all your family."
4. **Eid al-Fitr:** The Muslim celebration of Ramadan's end. The Muslim calendar has shifting dates, so this holiday sometimes falls in December. In 2022, it fell in May, and in 2023, it will fall in April. Say: "Eid Mubarak."
5. **Festivus:** A secular holiday that became popular after a Seinfeld episode. Yes, folks do celebrate this playful holiday! December 23. Say, "Happy Festivus." Slogan: "A Festivus for the rest of us!"
6. **Hanukkah:** The eight-day Jewish celebration of the Festival of Lights. December 18-26, 2022. Say: "Happy Hanukkah." Pro tip: "Chag Sameach" is Hebrew for "Happy Holiday" and fits most Jewish holidays (excluding the Sabbath and most fast days).
7. **HumanLight:** a Humanist holiday that celebrates compassion, humanity, and hope. December 23.
8. **Kwanzaa:** A weeklong secular holiday honoring African-American heritage. From December 26 to January 1. Say, "Joyous Kwanzaa." Or ask, "Habari gani?" In Swahili, that means, "What's the news?" The answer is whatever day of Kwanzaa it is ("Umoja," "Kujichagulia," etc.).
9. **Lunar New Year:** According to the AP Style Guide, "The most important holiday in several East Asian countries, marking the start of the Chinese lunar calendar... Lunar New Year is preferred over Chinese New Year or Spring Festival, the name it is known by in China." Observed in South Korea as Seollal and Vietnam as Tet. February 1 in 2022 and January 22 in 2023.
10. **Winter Solstice:** The shortest day of the year. December 21.
11. **Yule:** A pagan celebration of the above.

Courtesy: <https://interactcom.com/how-to-rock-inclusive-holiday-greetings-to-celebrate-the-season/>

Other resources:

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/13/new-tool-scores-campus-religious-diversity>
- <https://www.chronicle.com/article/faith-is-the-diversity-issue-ignored-by-colleges-heres-why-that-needs-to-change/>
- <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/religious-diversity-is-the-missing-piece-in-campus-dei-work/>
- <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/9-actions-colleges-can-take-to-promote-religious-diversity/>
- <https://operations.du.edu/inclusive-teaching/spiritual-and-religious-diversity>
Note DU's Religious Accommodation Policy
- https://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/newsletters/3/Nash_Final.pdf