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How This Year's Summit Helped Two Big 10 Campuses Win

By Lily Rybka

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LILY RYBKA AND FELLOW UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN STUDENTS AT THE 2024 INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP SUMMIT. AUGUST

2024, CHICAGO. PHOTO BY SUMMERSET STUDIOS.

How does the Interfaith Leadership Summit inspire students from across the nation to connect, collaborate, and advance interfaith engagement on their campuses? For UIUC junior and Interfaith America BRAID fellow, Lily Rybka, meeting fellow Big Ten campus leaders from the University of Michigan was an opportunity to share ideas and successes from her experience steering interfaith initiatives with other burgeoning interfaith leaders and forge friendship in the shared pursuit of pluralism. Read Lily's reflection on interfaith leadership below:

At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), an interfaith student organization has created a community hub for meaningful conversations, friendships, and mutual respect among students of varying beliefs. The campus is home to nearly 60,000 students and 1,000 registered student organizations, many tailored to suit the unique

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interests and identities of students. That is great for uplifting and empowering college students, however, a situation that arises at large campuses such as this one, is the creation of environments where almost everyone can become absorbed into homogenous communities. This can play out in many ways. Generally, people are very comfortable in their own group and more uncomfortable in an unfamiliar group. This is one of the unique challenges — but also a strength — of interfaith work at large universities.

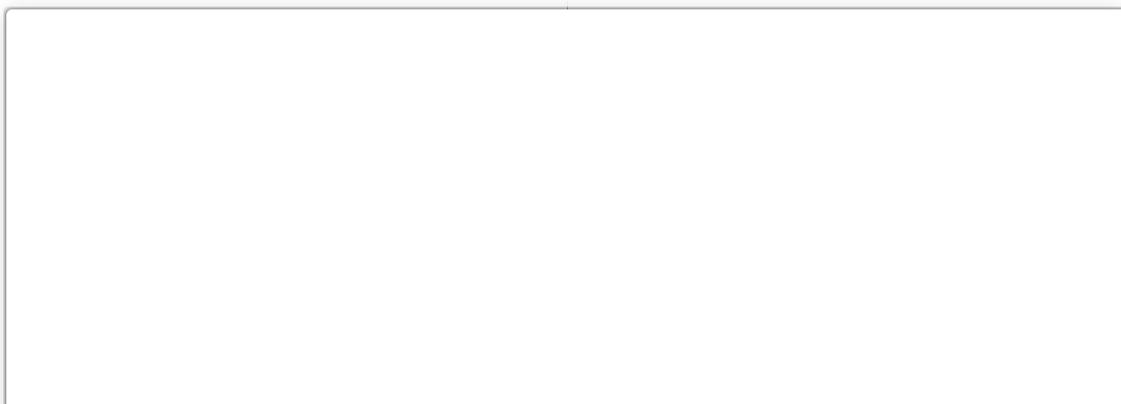
Each year, as divisions seem to grow stronger and tensions increase nationwide, [Interfaith in Action UIUC](#) gains traction. It has taken three years of trial and error of events, outreach, and relationship building on personal and organizational levels to develop the success of Interfaith in Action UIUC. I am proud to have grown this organization into one of stable status despite increased polarization on campus and beyond. Along with other student interfaith leaders in our interfaith organization, I have found that students desire a space on campus to meet different people and become friends explicitly because of the differences we have. We have created that space together. I am confident that this organization will be able to take on any new challenges that will come over time and contribute to unity in diversity on our campus.

This August, at the Annual Interfaith Leadership Summit in Chicago, momentum spread across campuses when other leaders of Interfaith in Action UIUC and I, met two students from the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, Elianna and Aleena. They are also passionate about interfaith leadership, so it was so exciting for all of us from big midwestern universities to connect and discuss interfaith work on our similar

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campuses. Aleena was particularly inspired by student leaders at the Summit inviting people to their 'pop up' style (unplanned) religious events such as a Shabbat Service and a Baha'i Devotional. As we discussed interfaith events in our groups at the Summit, it became clear that Interfaith in Action UIUC could serve as a model for similar campuses organizing interfaith work. Our weekly meetings, monthly dinners at places of worship, themed dinners, religious and cultural celebrations and trips were all ideas that could be replicated in a way that could work for my new friends from the University of Michigan. As the other UIUC students and I have experienced, it can be a challenge to build an organization without examples to work from and to know whom to ask for guidance.

Aleena and Eliana were so inspired by Interfaith in Action UIUC and our student leaders they met at the Summit, that they created an Interfaith in Action club this past fall at the University of Michigan using the name, model and mission created at UIUC. When in need of peer guidance, they have been able to reach out to UIUC students for specific icebreaker questions, event ideas, and even a club logo.





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Both during and after the Summit, we shared kindness, support, and our learned experiences to get Michigan's interfaith club off the ground. The Michigan students have hosted events such as Festifaith (make your own spiritual care kits) and, "Soup, Salad and Soul", similar to UIUC's "Flavors

of Faith: Free Feasts and Food Wisdom” and “First Tuesday Dinner Dialogue” events. Just as I met and bonded with Aleena and Elianna over meals and a passion for the common good at Interfaith America’s Summit, our events at our universities are creating space to share food and goodwill among larger student bodies across campuses.

I hope that the seeds planted by Interfaith in Action UIUC can take root at larger universities and create a growing network of interfaith work.



Lily Rybka and fellow University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign students at the 2024 Interfaith Leadership Summit. August 2024, Chicago. Photo by Summerset Studios.

Lily Rybka

Lily Rybka (she/her) is a junior studying Information Science + Data Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign iSchool with a minor in Global Studies. She is the current President of the student organizations Interfaith in Action and the Student Board of the University YMCA. Lily is passionate about bringing people together because of differences and building community through her work and the Jewish obligation of Tzedakah (righteousness, uplifting, sharing). In her free time, she enjoys traveling to cultural or natural landmarks and playing tennis and badminton.

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