

Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) Application

Research Questions and Goals:

My research is informed by a series of research questions:

How do faith claims and commitments influence participation in social justice work? What can we learn about what role commitments to justice play in community organizing from the organization Interfaith Worker Justice? Does interfaith organizing bring people together who wouldn't normally be together? Why and how does this matter in local communities?

The goal of my SURE project will be to collect data through participant-observation research that will help me answer these questions. I have chosen to examine the Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) movement as a case study of effective social justice interfaith organizing. I will investigate how IWJ interacts with faith communities to promote participation in social justice work for their participants and congregations. I seek to identify effective programmatic methods that support IWJ's capacity to leverage social change on behalf of marginalized communities. By studying an effective interfaith organization, I hope to identify and document successful strategies that contribute to social justice and social change. My long-term goal is to develop resources that can be used by other interfaith organizations to help them better reach their goals of social justice.

Rationale:

Religious communities in the United States possess a large amount of moral influence and are thus positioned to have a great impact on facilitating structural changes that can

contribute to broader social justice.¹ When religious communities work together through interfaith engagement, they have the capacity to help unite people of faith to work effectively together to further the well-being of their communities. Furthermore, in the midst of the increasing polarization of religious communities in the US, helping communities work together across lines of difference is an important social project within the context of a pluralistic US society.²

Interfaith work in the United States demonstrates several different approaches to interfaith organizing from campus initiatives to facilitated dialogues to grassroots social justice movements. My preliminary research into the work of various interfaith organizations in the US identified that one primary goal for undertaking interfaith work is to better the community and/or advocate for justice. In fact, working towards social transformation is one of the salient factors defining interfaith engagement in US society.

Two additional goals that various interfaith organizations express are their desire to promote education and to build relationships.³ Education is necessary, in part, because people do not know the point of view of other religious traditions, nor how they are similar or different from their own. Without nuanced awareness, people perpetuate stereotypes, which contribute to the very issues that social justice work seeks to address. When members of one faith tradition understand select shared moral commitments with other faith traditions, they can identify those commonalities as the basis for cooperation, which allows them to be more effective in making positive social change. It is also essential for people among these traditions to build relationships

¹ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*; Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom”; McCartin, “Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement.”

² Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014.

³ “The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge”; Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom.”

with one another. These relationships allow them to address differences in meaningful ways as well as foster individual networks and alliances that help social change initiatives reach a larger audience.⁴ Thus, education and relationships are beneficial necessary aspects of the interfaith movement.

In order to work effectively towards the goal of social transformation and justice, interfaith organizations use education and relationships as tools to facilitate action. Action means uniting different faith groups to work together in order to make a systemic difference in a particular community. Without action, the vision of interfaith organizations cannot be fully realized. Presently, most interfaith initiatives involving action focus primarily on service projects that involve fixing up buildings, park clean ups, and other community service activities that involve mainly manual labor and little risk. Some interfaith organizations like Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) and Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) go a step further and create action initiatives that focus on structural changes in our social order. Other interfaith organizations need to emulate IWJ and IPL by moving past models of direct service and towards action that promotes social change in order to achieve their stated purpose of working towards justice and the common good.

Improving the effectiveness of interfaith organizing for social justice can facilitate increased opportunities for people from different faith traditions to work with people across religious difference for justice. Such work can promote the development of deeper social relationships and more healthy communities as people seek to understand and accept religious difference.⁵ These methods of dialogue and engagement across lines of difference to develop meaningful relationships also offers a shared foundation for communities to address other

⁴ McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement."

⁵ Putnam, *American Grace*, 531.

divisive issues related to social capital and healthy communities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and ability.⁶ In addition to fighting for justice across lines of religious difference, those involved in interfaith communities will be better equipped to stand for justice across other lines of difference.⁷ Thus, the effectiveness of the interfaith justice movement affects more than just religious communities. Effective interfaith engagement can model the cooperation that is necessary to function in the incredibly diverse and pluralistic context of the United States.

Methodology:

Over the summer, I will conduct participant-observation in the IWJ headquarters as well as four affiliates I will identify during my 498 research hours in the spring 2018 semester. This methodology will allow me to study in intricate detail the structures and practices within the organization as a whole without relying on reports by the organization. It will also allow me to specifically investigate how individual, personal commitments support the established structure.

First, I will spend two weeks at the IWJ headquarters in Chicago to identify the structures and support systems that are available to the affiliates. Since IWJ has effectively impacted justice work across the nation, I will identify the overarching national vision and their approach to community organizing with and through their local affiliates.⁸ Next, I will conduct participant-observation at four identified affiliates that effectively produce social justice results with strong community participation from at least two different faith traditions. Since interfaith organizations are built on local relationships and concerns, we can expect that each affiliate will run differently. By observing multiple local affiliates, I will observe and document the strengths and weaknesses of different organizational models based on local contexts as well as personal

⁶ Gray, "Keeping the Faiths."

⁷ Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 119.

⁸ McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement," 96–97.

interactions and conflicts that arise when doing interfaith justice work. During this time, I will also participate in the work of local IWJ projects, modeling the approach of building solidarity through relationship building and participation in social action and reciprocity by giving back to the organization in addition to researching it as a case study.⁹ At each location I will conduct interviews with staff members and volunteers. At headquarters, I will use the opportunity to ask specifically about the vision and goals behind the structure as well as details of how they interact with local affiliates. At the local level, I will ask staff members similar questions to those asked in Chicago concerning vision, goals, structure, and involvement with IWJ headquarters. These interviews will also allow me a formal opportunity to ask about personal faith commitments, specific involvement within the organization, and how they see IWJ interacting with and affecting their community.

Works Cited and Bibliography

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Justice at Depaul University," 2007. [http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-1639.1152?needAccess=true)

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⁹ Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 41.

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Responsibilities of student (written by mentor):

1. Kristina will work with me during the first week of the SURE program to prepare for her participant-observation research. Our work will include reviewing her plans for keeping a field notebook as well as practice interviews and debriefing of the interviews.
2. Weeks 2-3 of SURE, Kristina will work as a volunteer in the national office of the Interfaith Worker Justice movement in Chicago, IL where she will gain a deeper knowledge of how IWJ works. She will interview the Executive Director, key members of the national staff, and select volunteers.
3. Weeks 4-7, Kristina will spend one week at each of four IWJ affiliates. Having researched the work of each affiliate prior to her arrival, during her week on-site, in addition to working directly on the projects enacted locally, she will learn more about the history and organizational model of each affiliate through interviewing staff members and volunteers, including key informants from partner communities of faith.
4. Week 8, Kristina will work with me at Elon to organize her field notes and her coding and analysis which will continue in the fall semester.
5. Kristina will keep a detailed field notebook of her participant-observation at the five sites and she will send her interviews for transcription on a weekly basis. She will submit a weekly report to me by 9 am on Monday mornings that summarize her observations and insights and

identifying key themes and questions. These reports will serve as the basis for our weekly Skype meetings on Wednesday afternoons.

Educational Benefits for the Student:

This research will help me obtain my educational and personal goals. As an Honors student, I am required to engage in an extended research process. The time and resources that SURE provides will allow me to gather the data in the field that I could not obtain during the school year. A SURE fellowship will thus enable me to engage in more rigorous and meaningful research through supporting my work with IWJ than I could complete if I were limited to researching only local community-based interfaith organizations. This research will also prepare me to accomplish long term personal and career goals effectively as after graduation I plan to enter the field of interfaith work to help people navigate difference while working together for social justice. By doing participant-observation within Interfaith Worker Justice, I will be immersed within the interfaith world, where I can begin to build the networks and relationships that are integral to interfaith work as described above. This research will help me understand the field as well as what my niche in the field might be. Thus, I will be better equipped to find and apply for jobs post-graduation.

Description of planned mentoring relationship (written by mentor):

I have worked with Kristina over the past two and a half years as a research mentor. During this time, I have witnessed her intellectual development as she moved to shape a personal interest into a meaningful research question shaped by current controversies in the field. We have

developed a strong rapport that will serve as a solid foundation for her SURE project and she has engaged in a substantive amount of background research on the history of interfaith work in the United States that significantly informs her project. Kristina will be doing four hours of 498 research with me in the spring of 2018 that will allow us to continue to develop the theoretical framework for her data collection during SURE and for her coding and analysis of the data. This solid mentoring relationship will serve as a strong foundation for our collaboration during the SURE period, even though she will be deployed in the field collecting her data for six of the eight weeks. Her weekly reports and our weekly Skype conversations will ensure that she is making the necessary progress on her research. Additionally, I will be available through email and by phone as needed for consultation.

Description of special circumstances and reason for circumstances:

To effectively study the organizing principles and effectiveness of a national organization like Interfaith Worker Justice requires time in the field to engage in participant-observation with several key affiliates. This participant-observation methodology necessitates that I spend substantial time in each community and thus, my research will require me to travel during the time of SURE. My schedule is outlined below, including a week at Elon at the beginning of SURE in order to work with my mentor to prepare for my data collection/participant-observation phase and a week at the end to work with my mentor to debrief the research experience and begin to develop a plan to process the data.

June 4-8 Elon

June 11-15 Chicago - IWJ

June 18-22 Chicago - IWJ

June 25-29 Affiliate #1

July 2-6 Affiliate #2

July 9-13 Affiliate #3

July 16-20 Affiliate #4

July 23-27 Elon

I will send weekly reports to my research mentor which we will discuss in weekly Skype meetings. My research mentor will also be available to work with me as needed throughout the eight week period.

Biographical sketch of the mentor (written by mentor):

One of my expertise in mentoring UR is working with students in Religious Studies who use ethnographic and interview methodologies. I had training in these research methodologies in graduate school at the New School for Social Research in New York. The use of ethnography in ethics is a relatively recent development and it is distinctly different from the use of ethnography by social scientists. I am well-suited to help mentor Kristina as she explores how to code and analyze her data and use it as data for examining her larger research question. In addition to my suitability for her research methodologies, I have successfully mentored eight undergraduate students at Elon, including one SURE student. I am also an expert in UR in the field of Religious Studies, having co-written two grants in the field of Religious Studies that funded pioneering work in our discipline on best practices in UR. I co-edited the primary book in our field on the subject as a result of those grants.

Relevant publications:

Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

“Developing Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies: Thinking Across the Curriculum,” co-written with

Bernadette McNary-Zak in *How to Get Started in Arts and Humanities Research with Undergraduates*,

edited by Iain Crawford, Sara E. Orei, and Olin Shanahan, Washington, Council on Undergraduate

Research, 2014.

“Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies: Pedagogical Challenges and Strategies,” *Spotlight on*

Teaching, Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 2010; issue guest editor with Bernadette McNary-Zak.

Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies, edited and with Introduction by Rebecca Todd Peters

and Bernadette McNary-Zak, American Academy of Religion *Teaching Religious Studies Series*, Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2011.

To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians, edited and with Introduction by Rebecca Todd Peters and

Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008.