

Open Encounter as a Design for Interfaith Engagement at Butler University

Aziel Nuñez

Director of The Compass Center

Butler University

Abstract: This article introduces Open Encounter, a framework for interfaith engagement that joins fidelity to one's own tradition with structures that protect the agency of all participants. The framework emerged through work of The Compass Center at Butler University, a secular institution with an interfaith staff, and it offers a clear approach for supporting spiritual care, student dialogue, and campus education in a plural setting. Three programs illustrate the framework in practice, including the student Interfaith Council, the Affiliates Network that provides tradition-specific care, and the Series on Religion and Society that brings academic inquiry into conversation with lived experience. Together these settings show how shared norms, first person testimony, and concrete hospitality can shape a community of belonging across difference. Assessment in this context remains light and student centered, with particular attention given to being seen, belonging, identity reflection, purpose, and wellbeing. Survey evidence from the academic year 2024 to 2025 indicates positive movement on these measures. The article situates this work within scholarship on interfaith leadership and research on belonging and persistence, offering colleagues a design that can be adapted to diverse campus contexts.

Keywords: *keywords, separated, by, commas, and, in, italics*

Introduction: The Design Challenge

A visiting pastor paused at the threshold where a Muslim and Jewish Life Resource Guide sat beside meditation sign-ups and several campus ministry flyers. “How,” he asked gently, “do you, as a Christian, witness to Christ while actively supporting other faiths?” That question, posed early in my tenure as Director, clarified one dimension of the design challenge that frames our work.

A second moment came only weeks later, when students returned to campus. During Welcome Week I gathered all student leaders (the presidents and vice presidents of our eleven affiliated ministries) for a celebration dinner before they hosted a tabling event for first-year students. After introducing myself, I asked how the Compass Center could support them in the year ahead. Several named a shared fear: with theological differences, would deeper interfaith engagement compromise their ability to lead from within their own traditions? Their honesty revealed the same tension I had heard from the visiting pastor, now voiced from inside the community I was charged to support.

For some, the term interfaith can raise questions about faithfulness or proselytization. At the Compass Center, interfaith names cooperation across traditions, and the same principles guide

collaboration among Christian communities. The term does not imply conversion or dilution. The design question is how a university center can support religious life in ways that honor conscience, protect agency, and build belonging.

Open Encounter is our response: a commitment to see shared humanity across difference, to learn about those differences, and to build respect without pressure to agree or assimilate. The aim is a campus where interfaith work feels accessible and meaningful, an invitation rather than an obligation. It embodies a pluralism that welcomes difference without demanding sameness. Consequently, Open Encounter serves as the framework for transformational learning in the sphere of spiritual life. It gives shape to interfaith engagement by aligning programs with student wellbeing and learning, protecting agency, and welcoming particularity without dilution. As Director of The Compass Center, I steward that aim by building structures and habits that make the work concrete and clear, possible in daily practice, and portable beyond our campus.

Open Encounter Framework

A clear framework for religious life in a plural campus community is imperative because diversity alone does not produce belonging or an open community. Those outcomes require structure, shared language, and daily habits, both institutional and personal, that make welcome visible and real. At Butler University, the Department of Culture and Inclusion fosters belonging across many social and cultural lines, including ethnicity. The Compass Center focuses parallel work in the sphere of spirituality and religion, helping ensure that religious and worldview diversity are supported with equal clarity and care.

Within our walls the challenge appears with religious specificity. Eleven interfaith organizations including Athletes in Action, Black Christian Fellowship, Butler Catholic Community, Butler Hillel, Butler Meditation, Butler Muslim Student Association, CRU, Grace Unlimited, LCMSU, Orthodox Christian Fellowship, and Young Life share a single home. Left to preference and the natural drift of a busy calendar, strong communities can unintentionally become silos that fragment campus life and invite subtle forms of competition. In those first weeks of the semester, I watched well-intentioned groups sit at separate tables, greet their own members warmly, and hesitate before engaging others. Nothing was hostile, yet the gaps were real. Open Encounter answers that risk by giving all participants a common way to meet one another, a shared set of rules for interaction, and a vocabulary that protects agency while allowing thick and recognizable particularity to speak.

Open Encounter rests on three design rules that work together. These rules are the minimum condition for encounters that build belonging without blurring difference. **First**, protect agency through noncoercive structures and clear consent. **Second**, center first-person testimony with tradition-forward teaching so people speak from what they practice rather than argue in the abstract. **Third**, pair accessibility with integrity through concrete hospitality, treating time, food, space, and communication as places where respect becomes tangible. **Together**, these rules cultivate responsible freedom and make curiosity and empathy ordinary.

Although the framework is conceptual, The Compass Center makes it real through program design. We translate these rules into practice across a family of programs that share a single

purpose and differ in emphasis. Thus, the Affiliates network foreground spiritual care by placing tradition specific leadership in relationship with students and with one another. The Interfaith Council foregrounds engagement by forming students to listen, speak from experience, and work across difference. The Series on Religion and Society foregrounds education by raising campus literacy through accessible scholarship and structured experience. Taken together, these examples show that Open Encounter is broad enough to sustain varied programming while keeping agency central and belonging in view. The scenes that follow trace these three expressions in turn.

Scene 1: Interfaith Council

Each year the Council brings together a new cohort. This year it included five Muslim students, one Jewish student, four Christians, and one student who names no faith at all. A student intern serves as chair, and I am present as a semi observer. I open the room, greet students as they arrive, and then step to the margins while the chair guides the discussion. Dietary needs are recorded at the first meeting and honored quietly at every gathering. My role is to intervene only when necessary, so that the room can learn to speak and listen without relying on a staff voice.

On the final dinner of the first semester the chair set the topic as winter holydays and celebrations. The conversation began with familiar facts and then drifted toward comparison. The chair gently returned the group to lived experience by asking a series of simple questions. What makes a day a celebration in your community? What do bodies do on that day? Who prepares what? How does time change? What does home smell like? What do you hear? The room shifted in response. A Muslim student described the quiet before dawn and the first bite after a long fast. A Jewish student recalled the feel of candlelight and a week shaped toward a holy evening. A Christian student spoke of music in a sanctuary and a family recipe that appears only once a year. The group moved from what people had heard about others to what they practiced themselves and why it mattered.

As the chair gathered threads, the Council named patterns that travel across traditions. These patterns included fasting and feasting, the use of light in a dark season, songs that belong to a particular time, extra attention to neighbors, and a shared sense that time can be shaped for meaning. Naming these patterns did not collapse difference. Instead, it made difference easier to approach. Students asked better questions, rested more comfortably in the conversation, and discovered a way of speaking that felt both honest and spacious.

From my seat at the edge of the room I saw more than the growth of trust. I saw a skill take shape. Students learned to communicate about faith, to remain with first person testimony when debate would have been easier, to ask curious questions rather than seek agreement, and to hold convictions without placing pressure on one another. The students closed the evening with renewed interest in interfaith engagement. They proposed a site visit to a religious community that was not represented at the table, a visit that would allow them to listen, observe, and ask better questions. The work continues throughout the year, and trust continues to move.

Scene 2: Affiliates and Spiritual Care

Open Encounter also works because it honors both openness and limits. I serve all students for nonreligious spiritual care, yet I cannot offer what belongs to the pastoral leaders within specific traditions. A Catholic student who seeks confession needs a priest. A Muslim student who seeks guidance in law and practice needs an imam. The Affiliates model makes this boundary a strength rather than a barrier. Mentors from local communities provide leadership and care within their own traditions, and at the same time remain open and accessible to all.

One evening the Muslim Student Association gathered for Friday (Jumma) prayer and a shared meal. I arrived early to greet students as they filtered into the room. Our Jewish life advisor was already present, speaking with students near the food table and asking about their week. When prayer began, he removed his shoes, stepped quietly to the side, and took a seat in respectful silence while Muslim students prayed on rugs at the center of the room. After the prayer concluded he joined the circle again, shared the meal, and asked gentle questions about the upcoming observance of Ramadan. The imam, who serves as our Muslim life advisor, guided the prayer and handled the pastoral questions that followed. The Jewish advisor offered another kind of care through presence, hospitality, and friendship.

Students noticed this scene and often mentioned it in later conversations. One first year Muslim student told me it was the first time they had seen a non-Muslim adult honor their prayer space with such care. Another student said the moment helped them understand what interfaith respect can feel like in practice. These responses revealed how simple gestures can shape a community. Boundaries remained clear and leadership stayed rooted in tradition specific roles. At the same time, students saw leaders who refused rivalry and instead practiced neighborliness.

That ordinary evening carries the weight of Open Encounter. Agency is protected. Difference is named and welcomed. Yet walls are lowered by the way people show up for one another. What results is not dilution. It is recognition. Belonging strengthens because each person honors the practice of another without hesitation. At The Compass Center, the network anchors concrete practice with appropriate community and does not require staff to deliver confessional teaching.¹

Scene 3: Series on Religion and Society

The Series on Religion and Society is a The Compass Center program that carries Open Encounter along the academic path. Each year the Series offers four events under a single theme, two in the fall and two in the spring, and it pairs with a Religious Studies course that follows the same topics. Students meet each visiting scholar for a small pre-event dinner, and afterward the lecture opens to the wider campus and community.

Within this year's theme, which explored religion and the popular imagination, one evening featured Dr. Justin Henry speaking on the topic of Sacred Stories on Television. His claim was straightforward and expansive: mass television can fix a single visual of a sacred story in public imagination, and repeated, emotionally charged viewing can give that depiction quasi-sacred weight. Using the Ramayana as the central case, students engaged Hindu tradition directly. Many

¹ John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen A. Mahoney, *The Resilience of Religion in American Higher Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

left the dinner and lecture recognizing how media, ritual, and memory intertwine across traditions they knew well and those they were just beginning to learn.

The dinner beforehand offered its own moment of learning. Students asked how scholars interpret diverse sources, how communities respond when a media portrayal becomes more widely known than the tradition itself, and how popular images can influence the practices of people who hold the story as sacred. A few students compared these dynamics with depictions of sacred figures in the traditions they knew from childhood. One student later told me that it was the first time they had understood why members of their own community reacted strongly to a televised depiction of a familiar story. The conversation provided a new vocabulary for describing a tension they had felt but never named.

In this setting, academic inquiry becomes its own form of encounter. It invites attention not only to churches, synagogues, and mosques, but also to temples, festivals, digital spaces, and cultural practices that may be less familiar. It is not the preferred path for every student, yet it remains an important one. It complements lived practice by giving language, method, and context to experiences that students have elsewhere on campus. In this way Open Encounter becomes ready for the classroom. Students learn to hold description and critique together, to honor thick particularity, and to recognize the social forces that shape how the sacred is imagined and shared.

The scenes above show how Open Encounter takes shape in daily practice. They illustrate how students learn, how leaders collaborate, and how community grows through simple habits of presence and respect. A brief view of student response offers a fuller picture and helps confirm that what we see in the room is also reflected in the experiences of those who participate.

Evidence So Far

Open Encounter has been successful in fostering belonging and learning across difference, and that success is visible through modest measures that fit the setting. In AY 2024–2025, The Compass Center administered an anonymized interactions survey to students who engaged at least one program ($n = 143$).² The survey predates my arrival and the formal naming of Open Encounter, and it reflects the thoughtful interfaith engagement the Center was already offering. The instrument combined brief Likert-type items on belonging, perceived safety, identity reflection, purpose exploration, wellbeing, leadership growth, and likelihood to recommend The Compass Center to a peer, along with one or two open-ended prompts. Results are descriptive and reported as the percentage of respondents to each item.

Among respondents who answered each item, 66.7% reported increased belonging and 67.7% reported increased safety. A total of 79.6% noted new opportunities to reflect on their own identity, and 79.6% noted new opportunities to reflect on the identities of others. Another 74.2% reported opportunities to explore purpose, and 71.0% named added value to overall wellbeing. Leadership growth appeared but was less uniform at 53.2%, and 59.4% indicated they would

² Randall Ojeda, “Interactions with the Center Survey, 2024 to 2025,” internal assessment archive, The Compass Center, Butler University.

recommend The Compass Center to a new student. These numbers do not prove a theory. They keep practice aligned with purpose and guide adjustments.

Student comments offer a human view of the same pattern. One student wrote that it was the first time they had spoken openly about their tradition with people outside of it and that they felt both respected and at ease. Another told me that a Religion and Society lecture helped them understand why a childhood story carried such emotional weight. Reflections like these show how norms of care, agency, and hospitality translate into student experience.

These outcomes align with the aims of Open Encounter. In our programs, being seen and belonging remain central, supported by attention to interreligious literacy and facilitation. Scholarship on interfaith leadership and findings from the IDEALS study suggest that appreciative knowledge, structured encounters, and shared action contribute to pluralism orientation and respectful peer attitudes.³ The results match what we see in gatherings and align with wider research that connects clear norms, concrete hospitality, and shared ownership to belonging, and belonging to persistence.⁴

Personal Approach to Interfaith Practice

I work as the only Christian on an interfaith staff in a secular setting, and my practice is shaped by that plural environment. In shared spaces I speak from my own discipline without hesitation, and I guard the freedom of my neighbors with the same care that I want for my own tradition. Interfaith gatherings are not spaces for recruiting or persuasion. When formation within a tradition is desired, it is named clearly, offered on an opt in basis, and guided by leaders who stand within that tradition. This clarity protects agency and helps create a community where difference is welcomed without pressure.

My approach did not arise in a single moment. It grew through two long chapters of work that shaped how I understand conviction, curiosity, and care. At a similar sized institution, I led a Compelling Preaching initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment. That project formed small cohorts of Christian preachers across theological, socioeconomic, generational, and cultural difference. Working in those cohorts taught me how to hold conviction and curiosity together, and how to create structures that encourage people to speak from their lived practice rather than from abstract debate.

For eleven years I also served Latino congregations in pastoral ministry. Those years taught me that communities that appear uniform from a distance often hold deep internal diversity. They also taught me how careful structures can help people build life together across difference. In those settings I learned to listen closely, to practice patience, and to design spaces where people could stand within their own traditions while still engaging one another with generosity.

³ Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Matthew J. Mayhew, and colleagues, *Friendships Matter: The Role of Peer Relationships in Interfaith Learning and Development* (Interfaith Youth Core and North Carolina State University, 2019).

⁴ Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018); Vincent Tinto, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

These strands come together in what I now call Open Encounter. In the Interfaith Council I remain at the margin so students learn to speak from experience and to listen well. In the Affiliates network I defer confessional care to leaders who are best placed to provide it and stand with them in the common work of supporting students. In the Religion and Society Series I let inquiry lead so that students gain language, method, and context for what they observe and feel elsewhere on campus. Across these settings the guiding rule remains the same. Name where you stand. Refuse coercion. Hold agency and hospitality together.

Here is my answer to the question at the threshold. I can speak from my own practice without pressure, and I can protect the freedom of my neighbors. That posture is faithful to my tradition and fair to the community, and on our campus it has helped students report greater belonging and safety. Open Encounter is less a single insight than a living philosophy, shaped over years of relational and educational work that prepared me to hold complex identities with humility and openness.⁵ In that way the threshold question is answered in practice and not in debate, and Open Encounter remains our promise to students.

Implications for Colleagues

The value of a framework is that it provides clear guardrails, especially when programs are diverse and student engagement takes many forms. Open Encounter offers a simple claim and a usable design. Protect agency. Invite people to speak from what they practice. Match access with integrity through concrete hospitality. In our setting this framework has held across spiritual care, interfaith engagement, and public education. It has also been measurable in small ways that help keep practice aligned with purpose.

For colleagues in other contexts, the work begins with translation rather than imitation. Every campus holds its own history, needs, and rhythms. Begin by naming one guiding rule that fits your setting and place it where students can see it. Choose one program and redesign it so that first person testimony leads and pressure is removed from the room. Invite a small circle of community mentors who can offer tradition specific care, and agree together on clear boundaries and shared norms. Keep assessment light and regular so that you gain insight without exhausting the people you serve. In time, practice becomes pattern, and pattern becomes culture.

If your campus is at an earlier stage, the first steps can be smaller still. Host a single meal with clear norms. Offer one co taught session with a community mentor. Add a short exit question that asks whether students felt seen and whether they would return. Each step can be modest and still move the work forward.

This is the promise of Open Encounter in a secular setting. It turns principle into design that students can inhabit. It supports transformational learning around spiritual life. It helps a dynamic campus community take root, one gathering, one habit, and one story at a time.

⁵ John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Aziel Nuñez serves as Director of The Compass Center at Butler University, the campus hub for spiritual life and the center for meaning, purpose, and spiritual life. He is a lecturer at Christian Theological Seminary and a research assistant with the Rooted in Spirit project at the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis. His work focuses on agency centered design, interfaith engagement, and on the formation of students and communities across diverse traditions.