

**Report of the Interfaith Center Planning Group**



**Relocation of Interfaith Center to the Campus Center**

**March 1, 2018**  
**Division of Student Affairs**

## **Background**

The main campus of the University at Albany has a long and rich history. Indigenous people traveled through this area to access what were later called the Mohawk and Hudson rivers. In the 1700s, these trails became part of the King's Highway, connecting Schenectady and Albany. The Great Western Turnpike, featuring toll houses and taverns, was established later and ran close to what is now Western Avenue. The McKown family opened an establishment along the route and eventually opened a second business near the bottom of Fuller Road, ultimately giving rise to McKownville.

In the late 1800s, land associated with the Western Turnpike toll house in what is now the McKownville section of Guilderland was eventually incorporated into the Albany Country Club. In 1905, a hunting lodge was built on some of that property by Billy Barnes, the leader of the Albany Republican party. Nearly six decades later, in 1960, the state of New York acquired 230 acres of the Albany Country Club as then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller sought to expand the State University system with four University Centers, including what is now the University at Albany. Five years later, as UAlbany's Uptown Campus took shape, the Barnes hunting lodge, pictured below, was purchased from the Nord family by the Capital Area Council of Churches. Chapel House, as it was then known, opened in the fall of 1965 and was formally dedicated on May 22, 1966.



In May 1970, Milton Olsen, vice president of management and planning at the University, launched a campaign to raise \$75,000 to allow the Albany Collegiate Interfaith Center (ACIC), a private not-for-profit organization that Olsen led, to purchase Chapel House from the Council of Churches and to repair and remodel the facility. Of that \$75,000, \$15,000 was to be used to purchase land from what was then known as the SUNYA Faculty-Student Association so Chapel House could be accessed from the campus perimeter road instead of Western Avenue.

The ACIC operated Chapel House in the Barnes hunting lodge until it was destroyed by fire on May 25, 1985. After the fire, the University provided support to Chapel House staff and services by making space available in the Campus Center. Chapel House was housed on the third-floor of the Campus Center.

The current Interfaith Center was built in 1987-88 after a fundraising effort that included \$300,000 raised by then-UAlbany President Vincent O'Leary for a new Chapel House. Designed by Benjamin Mendel Jr., the new building opened April 5, 1988.

## **The Sale of 1 University Drive West**

In March 2016, the Albany Collegiate Interfaith Center, owners of the Interfaith Center building, approached the University about buying the building and surrounding property, known as 1 University Drive West. On November 22, 2016, the ACIC sold the property to the University at Albany Foundation. That sale did not include provisions governing the future use of the building. While the University is committed to ensuring that interfaith services continue to be available to the campus community, UAlbany's future use of the building will be determined pending necessary renovations and an analysis by the University of its space needs.



In the interim, the University at Albany Foundation allowed the University, through a license agreement, to continue to use the building to house interfaith programming until a permanent location could be identified. In October 2017, the University announced plans to re-locate its interfaith programming – now overseen by the University's Office of Intercultural Student Engagement – to the Campus Center by June 1, 2018. This date was chosen to minimize disruption during the academic year and ensure that interfaith programming is settled in the Campus Center in time for summer orientation and the fall 2018 semester.

#### **Planning for a New Interfaith Center in the Campus Center**

In November 2017, the University convened a working group to assess the programmatic and facilities needs of interfaith programming moving forward. This Interfaith Services Planning Group (ISPG) included the three chaplains from the ACIC's founding faith groups, the leaders of five student faith-based groups, a representative from the Student Association, and representatives from the Office of Campus Planning and Division of Student Affairs. This group met three times during the fall semester and once in the spring.

In addition to the meetings of the Planning Group, the following activities took place:

- A representative from the University toured the Interfaith Center to become re-acquainted with the space and better understand its structure and function

- A representative from the University toured the Interfaith Center at Stony Brook University, met with their Director, and met with the Dean of Students who oversees this area

- Representatives from Campus Planning and Student Affairs met with the three chaplains and toured the Interfaith Center

- Representatives from the Office of Government and Community Relations and the Division of Student Affairs met with the Protestant Ministry Board of Directors

- Representatives from the Office of Campus Planning and the Division of Student Affairs met with the Director of Campus Ministry at the College of St. Rose and toured the St. Rose Interfaith Center

Representatives from Campus Planning, Campus Center Management, and Student Affairs have toured the Campus Center on multiple occasions to explore potential locations for interfaith services moving forward

The University President met with the chaplains representing the Interfaith Center's three founding faith groups.

Facilities met with the three chaplains to develop a detailed list of items to be moved.

Throughout this process, the chaplains provided important information regarding the types and frequency of events sponsored by the Interfaith Center as well as functions sponsored by student groups and student participation rates. The University convened the ISPG with the understanding that it would likely not be possible to match every aspect of the space currently available to the faith groups at 1 University Drive West but that the University would make a good-faith effort to match as much of that space as possible given space demands by many student groups across the campus.

After sharing information and subsequent discussions, the following were identified by the chaplains and the student faith-based groups as needs to support continued interfaith programming on campus:

Individual office for each chaplain to meet with students, conduct confidential conversations, and provide a working space – including space for standard office furniture, lockable files, phones, computers, printers, etc.

A meditation space large enough to meet the needs of students from various faiths

A multi-purpose room where students could meet, plan events, work on projects, etc. This space could also be used for slightly larger gatherings

Storage space to contain religious iconography, liturgical supplies and student groups' supplies

- A library for the Interfaith Center's collection of books on philosophy and religion
- A lounge area/communal space featuring soft furniture where students could gather informally to discuss issues, relax, watch movies, etc.

An area for a breakroom for coffee machine, small fridge, microwave, small storage cabinet.

## **Conclusion**

The University acknowledges that the relocation will provide some challenges, especially for events that involve food preparation. Some of these challenges are inherent in the transition from a facility owned and funded by a private not-for-profit corporation to one operated by the State.

For example, the relocation of interfaith services to the Campus Center will require the utilization of campus food services for food-related functions, which might add to the overall cost of those events. Additional costs might also be incurred for events that take place in the evening or on weekends. All student organizations who use the Campus Center are subject to similar fees. Lastly, two outside spaces, a Peace Garden and a Labyrinth, currently adjacent to 1 University Drive West might not be easily replicated near the Interfaith Center's future location. The University, however, will work collaboratively with the faith groups to address these issues as they present themselves.

These challenges notwithstanding, the University is committed to ensuring that interfaith services are available to the campus community in the wake of the ACIC's decision to sell its building. That is why interfaith programming has now been added to the portfolio of responsibilities of the Office of Intercultural Student Engagement. Among other things, the relocation of the Interfaith Center to the Campus Center will provide a more central location for interfaith programming and make those services more accessible to a larger segment of the campus community. While the University recognizes that this change will be difficult for many of the Interfaith Center's dedicated students and volunteers, we are grateful for their input and assistance throughout this process.

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