

Navigating Pluralism

How Students Approach Religious Difference and Interfaith Engagement in Their First Year of College



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The first year of college can be both exciting and daunting for incoming students. During this critical time, students often encounter the unfamiliar, including worldviews about which they have limited prior knowledge beyond what is conveyed by the media and popular culture. These encounters may open opportunities for transformative learning when properly supported, but can also be a source of tension in certain circumstances. As they adjust to their new surroundings, how do students perceive campus climate and navigate interactions with diverse others, particularly those who do not share the same worldview? How might these experiences in the first year of college shape attitudes toward diverse social identity groups?

In 2015-2016, 7,194 college students attending 122 colleges and universities participated in the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). The IDEALS project assesses students' campus experiences related to religious diversity and interfaith engagement, and tracks changes in their religious diversity attitudes and behaviors across the college years. Students responded to an initial survey in Fall 2015 as first-year students at their institutions, and completed a subsequent survey in Spring or Fall 2016. Because the same students were surveyed at two time points, we are able to shed light on the role the first-year experience plays in the learning and development of students, especially in terms of their understanding of religious matters in today's society.

The data shared in the following report are representative of the national college student population. Thus, they provide educators across the U.S. higher education landscape with an uncommon opportunity to explore and engage often-perplexing issues of religious and worldview diversity as they relate to the college experience, campus climate, and student outcomes. This report addresses key findings in these domains, revealing myriad factors facing first-year students.



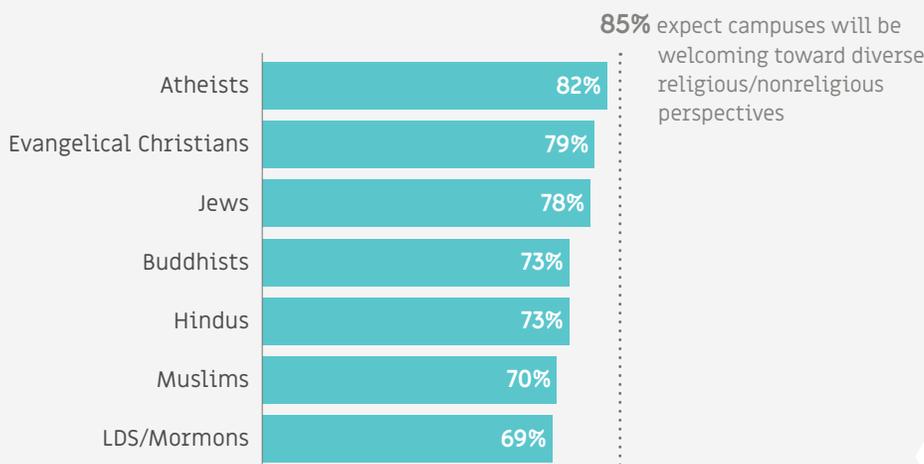
Opportunity to Close a Gap: Where Expectations Meet Experience

Students enter college with high expectations for a welcoming campus environment, but perceptions of welcoming others with diverse worldviews, sexualities, and races do not fully meet expectations.

As students enter college, they expect their campuses to be places of welcome for people of diverse backgrounds. A full 89% think it is “important” or “very important” to provide a welcoming environment for people of diverse racial identities, while 78% say the same about welcoming people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Aligned with their expectations for welcome along the lines of race and sexuality, 85% of students prioritize welcoming people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives.

We examined students’ actual observations of welcome for different identity groups at the end of the first college year, and learned that 83% of students agree (“somewhat” or “strongly”) that their campus is a welcoming place for people of different races; 85% and 74%, respectively, believe their campus welcomes lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and transgender individuals. When asked whether their campus is welcoming for different worldview groups, students report varying perceptions depending on the worldview group in question. It appears that students perceive the most welcome for atheists, Evangelical Christians, and Jews, and the least welcome for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints (LDS)/Mormons.

Percentage of Students Who Perceive the Campus as Welcoming Toward:





In other words, perceived welcome on campus falls a bit short of expectations in the case of welcome for people of different races, transgender people, and people of different worldviews (especially Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and LDS/Mormons).

A student's identity also plays a role in shaping perceptions of a welcoming campus. For instance, Hindus perceive more welcome on campus for Hindus compared to students who do not identify as Hindu. A similar pattern follows for LDS/Mormons and Muslims. In general, these three groups are more optimistic about welcome for their own groups than are other students. Conversely, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are less assured than other students that their campus is a welcoming place for LGB people. This pattern holds for transgender students as well; they do not perceive as much welcome for transgender individuals on campus as do cisgender students. For instance, 75% of cisgender students agree that the campus is a welcoming place for transgender people; only 41% of transgender students agree with the same statement. Students of color, likewise, are less convinced than are White students that the campus is a welcoming place for people of different races.

Reflection for Practice

Given students have high expectations for campuses to be welcoming for students of diverse worldviews, races, sexual orientations, and gender identities, campus educators should attend to potential gaps between expectations and experiences. The disconnect between expectations and experiences could be disillusioning for students and potentially limit their social integration into the campus community, resulting in repercussions for collegiate success. To recognize and address potential gaps, staff and faculty should consider collecting data on student perceptions of campus welcome and using that information to guide targeted interventions and change.

- What data do you have or need to collect regarding student perceptions of a welcoming climate for people of different worldviews, races, sexual orientations, and gender identities?
- If you have this information, what concerted efforts can you introduce to make the campus environment more welcoming for certain populations?



Amidst Deep Political Divides, Appreciative Attitudes Toward Both Ends of the Political Spectrum Grow

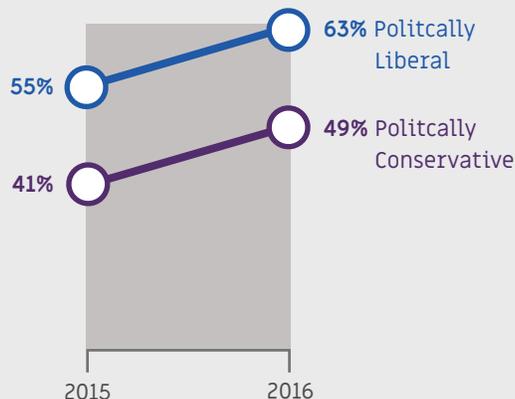
Students generally perceive more welcome on campus for liberal people than conservatives. Several personal and experiential factors influence changes in students' attitudes toward liberals and conservatives in their first year on campus.

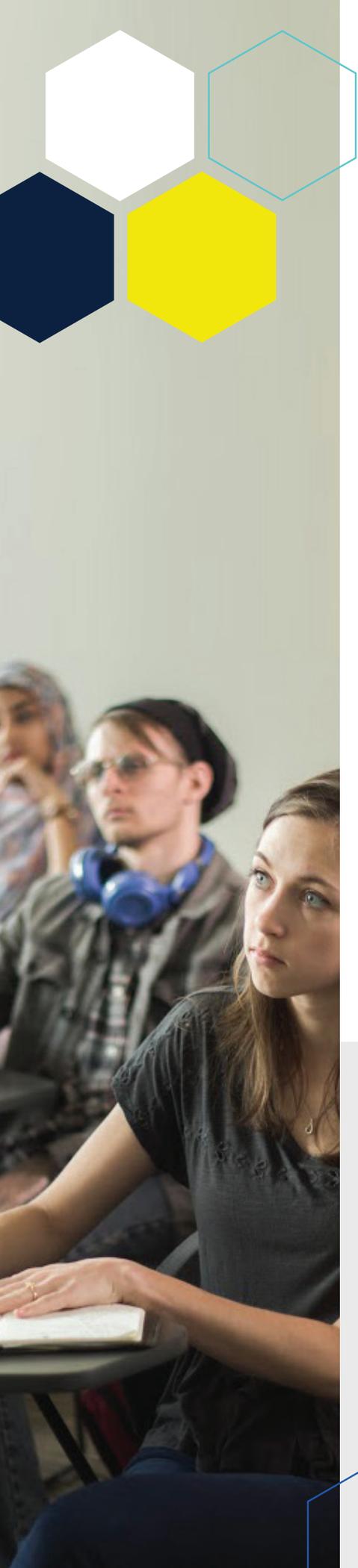
The relationship between political ideology and worldview identity is a perennially hot topic at the national level, particularly in the current climate. A recent study from the Higher Education Research Institute showed that incoming first-year students in the fall of 2016 came to campus as the most politically polarized cohort in the survey's 51-year history (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Whang Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017). Against this troubling backdrop, data from IDEALS illuminate the relationship between worldview and politics, and point to both complicated and potentially heartening trends.

At the outset of college, 41% of students characterize their political leaning as "moderate." All other political orientation categories are smaller in size, but the trend is left leaning with 29% of students identifying as "liberal" and 12% identifying as "very liberal." By contrast, 15% of incoming students describe themselves as "conservative" and just 4% as "very conservative."

After one year of college, students agree that their campuses are, on the whole, more welcoming of liberals (84%) than conservatives (69%). Paralleling their observations of campus, student assessments of their own attitudes suggest they have more favorable perceptions of liberals relative to conservatives. Fifty-five percent of students indicate highly appreciative attitudes toward politically liberal people at the start of college, while 41% feel similarly positive about conservatives.

Percent of Students with Highly Appreciative Attitudes Toward:





Although both students and the institutions they attend may be somewhat more inclined toward adopting or accepting liberal perspectives, during the first collegiate year it seems that students become increasingly appreciative of both liberals and conservatives at the same rate. One year after arriving on campus, 63% of students have highly appreciative attitudes toward liberals and 49% hold highly appreciative attitudes toward conservatives (a change of 8 percentage points for each group).

Students' growth in positive attitudes toward liberals and conservatives is linked to their demographic characteristics as well as to experiences they have as first-year students. Some individuals, specifically Confucianists, Hindus, Sikhs, and women, are inclined to become more appreciative of both sides of the political spectrum during their first year on campus. Moreover, many of the interfaith or worldview experiences that tend to spur pluralism development in general—perceiving space for support and spiritual expression on campus, having provocative encounters with people of other worldviews, perceiving the campus as welcoming of different social identity groups, and formal interfaith engagement—also engender growth in students' appreciation of both liberals and conservatives. That is, exposure to diversity in one domain (religion and worldview) is closely linked to growth in appreciation of identities in another domain (politics). Specifically, when students have conversations that dispel stereotypes about other worldviews or faith traditions, participate in co-curricular interfaith activities (e.g., community service work with people of other worldviews, interfaith dialogue), and feel their own worldview and others' worldviews are supported and freely expressed on campus, they are more inclined to grow in their appreciation of both political groups.

Two college experiences stand out as contributors to changing attitudes toward conservatives in particular. Being friends with someone of a very different political orientation is especially important when it comes to improving students' attitudes toward conservatives. However, informal social engagement with religiously diverse peers undermines positive attitudes toward conservatives, which may suggest that political conversations among peers in residence life, dining halls, study groups, and other informal spaces where students congregate are leaving negative impressions of conservative individuals or their views.

Reflection for Practice

Many of the same practices that influence appreciative attitudes toward various religions and worldviews also seem to produce shifts in attitudes toward those with conservative and liberal political ideologies. In particular, interfaith experiences can play a compelling role in deepening appreciation at both ends of the political spectrum.

- How can you promote interfaith efforts on campus as bridge-building opportunities to close political divides?
- What campus stakeholders might become engaged in collaborative efforts to heal political rifts?

Students Point to Few Overt Indicators of Religious Prejudice, but Insidious Discriminatory Practices Are More Common

Students report varying degrees of divisiveness, coercion, and insensitivity depending on campus context, and religious minority students tend to face more challenges with campus climate than their majority peers.

On the whole, pronounced conflict between students of different worldviews on campus is not customary. Less than one-fifth of students agree that:

- Religious and nonreligious differences create a sense of division on this campus (17%)
- There is a great deal of conflict among people of different religious and nonreligious perspectives on this campus (18%)
- People of different religious and nonreligious perspectives quarrel with one another on this campus (19%)

Although overt tensions are not the reported norm, divisiveness surfaces in other, more subtle ways. A slight majority of students (53%) feel that “people on this campus interact most often with others of their same worldview.” In addition, perceptions of divisiveness are less pronounced in private higher education contexts (both sectarian and nonsectarian) than in public colleges and universities.

On many campuses, the tendency of students to self-segregate on the basis of worldview is coupled with feeling pressured or coerced by others from time to time. More than half of students have at some point felt pressured to:

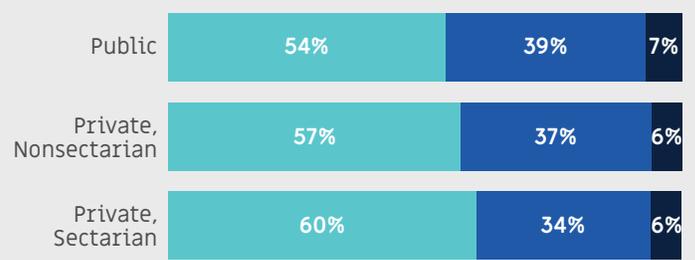
- Change their worldview (52%)
- Separate their academic experience from their personal worldview (55%)
- Listen to others’ perspectives when they didn’t want to hear about them (61%)
- Keep their worldview to themselves (62%)

Although frequent coercion is uncommon, pressure from others may reinforce students’ inclinations in their first year on campus to interact primarily with people of the same worldview. Also, students attending public institutions, compared to both sectarian and nonsectarian private institutions, experience higher levels of coercion.

Coercion and Divisiveness by Institutional Affiliation



- Private, Sectarian
- Private, Nonsectarian
- Public



- Low Coercion
- Medium Coercion
- High Coercion

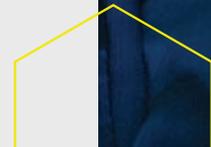
Regular instances of insensitivity and discrimination on campus occur for only small numbers of students. Nonetheless, students do overhear insensitive comments about their worldview, even if only rarely, in their first year on campus. As first-year students, 49% hear insensitive comments from faculty, and 41% encounter such insensitivity with campus staff or administrators. Relative to faculty and staff, peers and friends are more likely to make inconsiderate remarks: 79% of students have heard negative comments from these individuals. Moreover, IDEALS data suggest that approximately one-quarter of first-year students are the target of religiously-motivated discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation (25%), race or ethnicity (28%), gender identity (28%), or worldview (32%).

Perceptions of divisiveness, coercion, and insensitivity vary by students' worldview. Specifically, religious minority students (i.e., students of faith traditions other than Christianity) perceive more divisiveness and insensitivity on campus than either worldview majority or nonreligious students. Relative to their peers, they also perceive greater coercion on campus.

Reflection for Practice

Witnessing division, coercion, or insensitivity on campus can be disheartening for many students. Although incidents are infrequent, they degrade campus climate and shape students' experiences, particularly among those of minority worldviews. Campus educators should consider the following questions:

- How do campus leaders articulate and illustrate that the institution embraces students of all worldviews, specifically those of minority worldviews?
- In what ways do campus leaders encourage and exemplify building bridges across worldview differences?
- What formal channels exist for reporting bias incidents based on worldview? Are students appropriately informed about the process? Are there formal protocols that mobilize administrators to address issues of worldview bias?



Attitudes and Actions Drift Further Apart in the First Year

Students maintain their commitments to pluralism across the first year, but become less engaged with religious diversity.

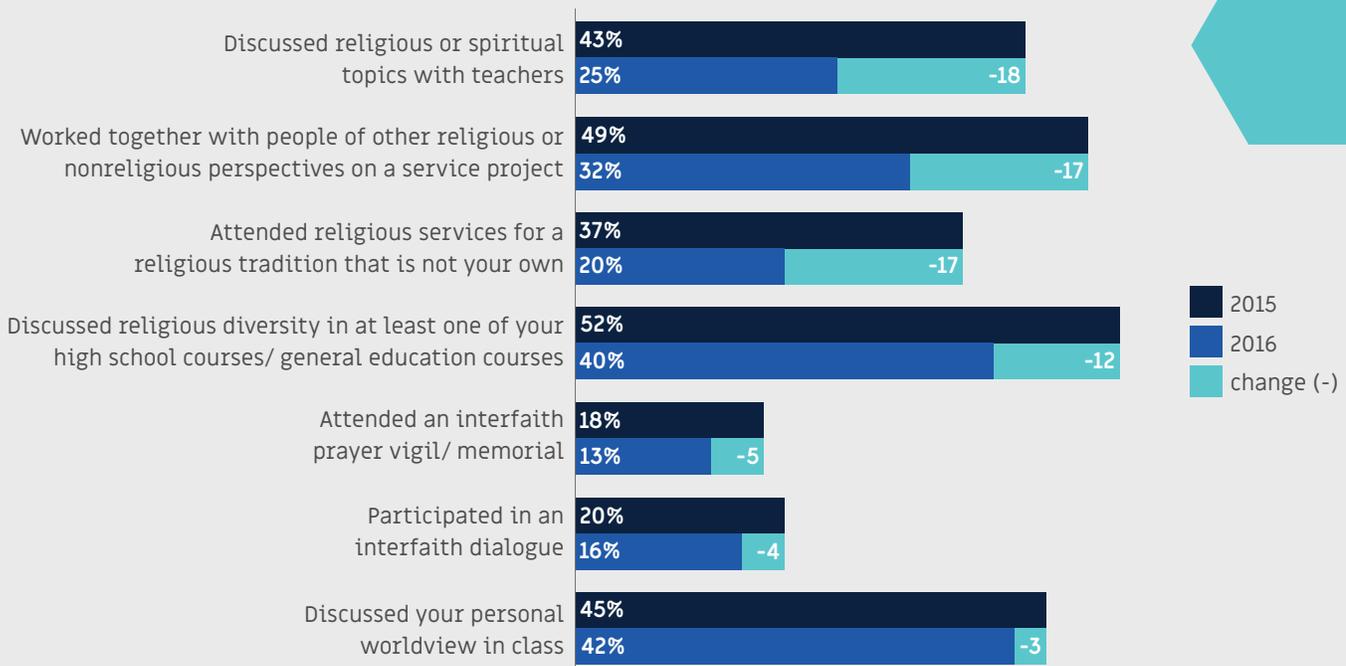
Students come to their campuses strongly committed to pluralism, meaning that, among other things, a vast majority:

- Respect people who have religious or nonreligious perspectives other than their own (91%)
- Understand that world religions share many common values (86%)
- Admire people of other faiths and beliefs (85%)
- Feel inspired to work with people of other worldviews on issues of common concern (81%)
- Are actively working to foster justice in the world (61%)

The commitment to pluralism that students express as they begin their first academic year remains fairly consistent over time. Findings suggest that students persist in these commitments rather than changing substantially.

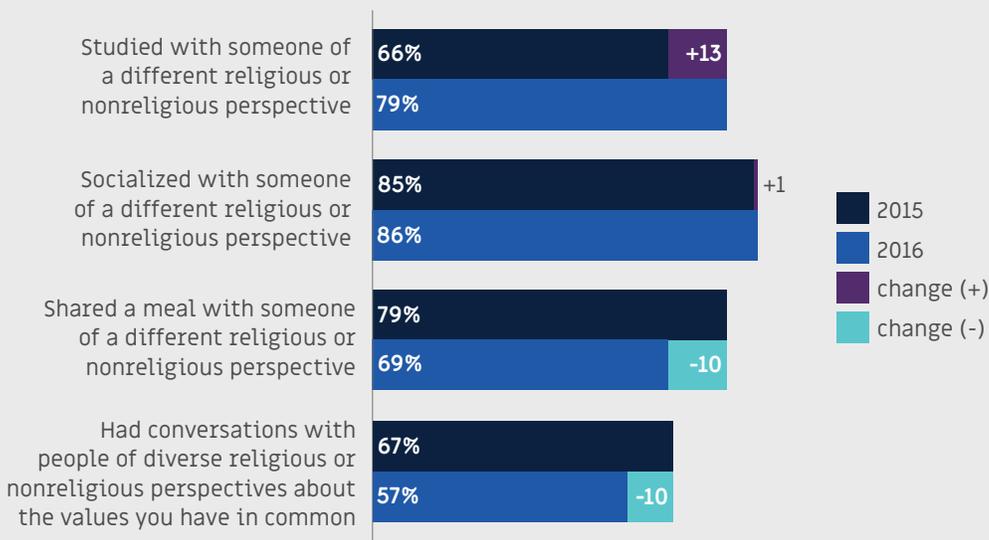
Despite the values and commitments that students profess, behavioral changes in students' first collegiate year present a different story. Religious diversity engagement rates drop among students—sometimes markedly—from the 12 months prior to attending their institution to the end of their first year on campus. For instance, in 2015-2016, the number of students participating in formal or classroom-based interfaith activities dropped by 18 percentage points. The sharpest decline was in students' discussions of religious or spiritual topics with teachers. Nearly half of students (43%) had such discussions prior to coming to campus; one-quarter did so during their first year in college.

Formal or Classroom-Based Interfaith Engagement



Students tend to exhibit high levels of informal interfaith engagement—having conversations, sharing a meal, studying, or socializing with people of other worldviews—both prior to and during their time on campus. In fact, rates of informal engagement are generally in the 60-90% range. However, despite the presence of religiously diverse students at many institutions, rates of informal engagement decline or change very little across the first year. From 2015 to 2016, sharing a meal with someone of another religious or nonreligious perspective and having conversations with people of diverse worldviews about common values each dropped by ten percentage points over the course of one year, while socializing across diverse perspectives remained fairly constant. The only exception to this general pattern was studying with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective: 66% of incoming students studied with people of another worldview in the 12 months prior to attending their institution, and this number rose to 79% one year later.

Informal Interfaith Engagement



Reflection for Practice

Declines in both curricular and co-curricular engagement in interfaith activities is certainly a point of concern. As first-year students navigate changes to life circumstances, social circles, and curricular expectations, participation in religious and interfaith activities may become less of a priority. As a result, campus educators should consider ways that interfaith experiences can be integrated into existing programs, services, and courses.

- In what ways can worldview identity and interfaith engagement be integrated and explicitly acknowledged in existing first-year initiatives (e.g., orientation, welcome week, first-year seminar)?
- How can you capitalize on relationships with residence life, student activities, and multicultural affairs to bring interfaith experiences to spaces in which first-year students are already engaging?



Religious Literacy and Engaging Difference: the Recipe for Appreciating All Religious Groups

Students' appreciative attitudes grow significantly more positive during their first year on campus in large part because of welcoming campus climates, friendships, challenging and supportive experiences, and growth in religious literacy.

To gauge appreciative attitudes toward specific social identity groups, IDEALS captures the extent to which people agree with the following four statements:

- In general, people in this group make positive contributions to society.
- People in this group are ethical.
- I have things in common with people in this group.
- I have a positive attitude toward people in this group.

Students who agree "strongly" or "somewhat" with all four statements for a particular group are considered "highly appreciative" of that group.

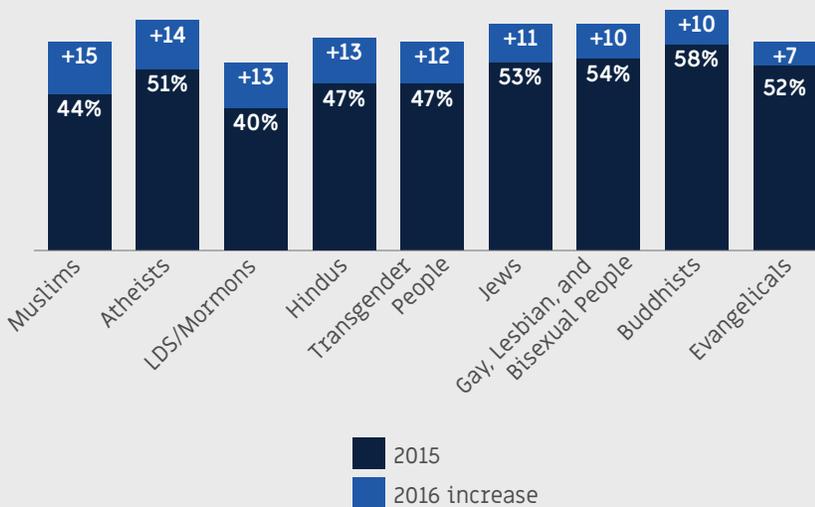


As they begin college, slightly more than half of entering students have highly appreciative attitudes toward Buddhists; Jewish people; gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; Evangelical Christians; and atheists. Slightly less than half are appreciative of Hindus and transgender people. It appears that Muslims and LDS/Mormons are most at risk, as only 44% and 40% of incoming students, respectively, have favorable attitudes toward these groups. Attitudes toward more general social categories—people of a different race or people of a different country—are demonstrably more positive, with close to 70% of entering students asserting favorable perceptions toward those of other races and countries.

Across the first year of college, students become significantly more appreciative in their attitudes toward specific social identities, with rates of growth between 7 and 15 percentage points. Change is most pronounced in attitudes toward Muslims and Atheists. Moreover, by the end of the first year of college, the majority of students demonstrate appreciative attitudes toward each group listed on the survey.



Percentage of Students Who Are “Highly Appreciative” of:



Across the first year of college, students become significantly more appreciative in their attitudes toward specific social identities, with rates of growth between 7 and 15 percentage points.

Such noteworthy growth in positive attitudes during students’ first year on campus is attributable to many factors. Exposure to a religiously diverse campus environment is one plausible explanation for attitude change, but the particular circumstances in which diverse encounters occur make a difference. For instance, student perceptions of compositional diversity—or simply attending a college or university that they believe to be comprised of people of different religious affiliations and worldviews—is not a consistent predictor of growth in appreciative attitudes, and may actually deter growth. Likewise, whether an institution is public, private nonsectarian, or religiously affiliated appears to have unreliable effects on attitudes. What conditions and experiences in the first year of college contribute the most to attitude change? It turns out that positive campus climate features, friendships, productive interpersonal diversity engagement, and support for spiritual expression are key.

On campuses that are perceived to be welcoming places for people of diverse worldviews and identities in general, students' attitudes toward specific groups—atheists, Buddhists, Evangelical Christians, Muslims, LGBT people, people of different political orientations, and so on—improve. Moreover, close friendships spur attitudinal change. When a student has at least one close friend of a particular group, they become more appreciative of that group overall. In addition to welcoming campus climates and friendships, students who engage with peers in ways that are both productive and challenging develop positive attitudes in their first year on campus. Such provocative encounters are those that challenge students to reconsider their assumptions and stereotypes about other worldviews, and the more exchanges of this type that students have, the better. That said, provocative encounters are only part of the attitude change equation. Also key is space for support and spiritual expression; that is, an environment that supports students' spiritual growth and encourages free expression of diverse beliefs and perspectives.

Appreciative knowledge about different worldview groups is also linked to attitudinal change. IDEALS includes a brief quiz as part of the survey that is designed to assess knowledge of eight different worldviews. The questions reflect more than merely facts about different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious perspectives—they reveal whether students can identify positive attributes and contributions of various worldviews. On the whole, students' appreciative knowledge is positively correlated with appreciative attitudes. In other words, understanding the contributions of different faith or worldview groups strengthens students' goodwill and respect toward those groups. And the reverse is also true—when students hold appreciative attitudes toward different groups, they may invest in learning more about them.

Influential Factors for Appreciative Attitudes

Welcoming Climate



The campus climate for worldview diversity is shaped by various overt and covert features such as visibility of particular identity groups, availability of resources for diverse individuals, and apparent well-regard for distinct groups. Taken together, these features inform student perceptions of their campus environment. When students view their environment as welcoming of a particular worldview group, there appears to be growth in appreciative attitudes toward members of that group.

Close Relationships



Appreciative attitudes toward people of a specific worldview tend to increase when students have close friends from that worldview group.

Provocative Encounters with Diverse Peers



When students have challenging and meaningful exchanges with diverse peers, they tend to develop more appreciative attitudes toward a range of worldviews and social identity groups. Provocative encounters are experiences in which students are challenged to rethink assumptions or perceptions of other worldviews, or more deeply examine their own beliefs.

Space for Support & Spiritual Expression



Students who report experiencing greater support for their own worldview also show increased appreciative attitudes toward others. Space for support and spiritual expression is reflected in policies that provide religious accommodations, availability of groups or organizations for students to explore and express their worldviews, and the presence of campus educators to whom students can turn to support their worldview expression.

Appreciative Knowledge



When students know more about positive aspects of other worldviews, they also tend to have higher appreciative attitudes in general. It seems that factual information invoking positive regard for a tradition or community may be distinctly important.

Looking Forward

The IDEALS data provide insights into promising pathways for shifting student attitudes, and highlight challenges for interfaith engagement in U.S. higher education today. Campus educators can use these findings to showcase the benefits of providing a welcoming campus climate, support for students of various religious and nonreligious identities, and opportunities to build relationships across lines of worldview difference. However, this report is also a call for concerted efforts to meet students where they are, whether by attending to the unique needs of worldview minority students or infusing interfaith programming into other first-year experiences. The findings and implications reviewed in this report can be a catalyst for action as educators thoughtfully consider how to build bridges and interfaith cooperation within their distinct institutional contexts.

References

Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Zimmerman, H. B., Aragon, M. C., Whang Sayson, H., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2017). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2016*. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

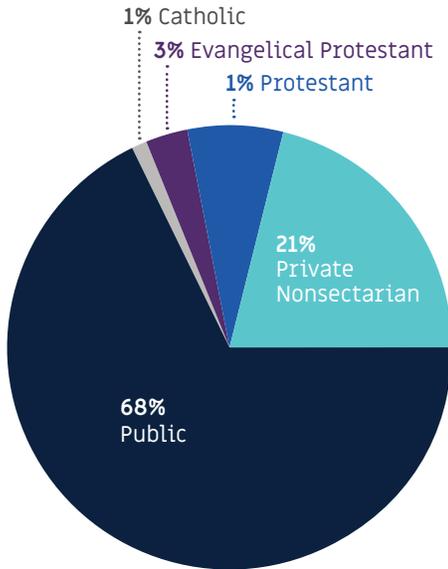


IDEALS Sample

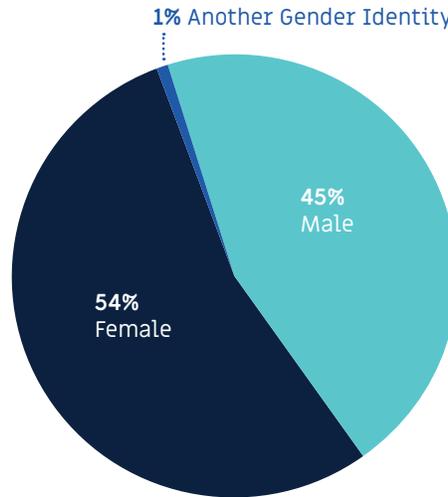
7,194 first-year students

The demographic information below represent data that are weighted to reflect national trends regarding full-time, first-year students enrolled at four-year institutions in the fall of 2015.

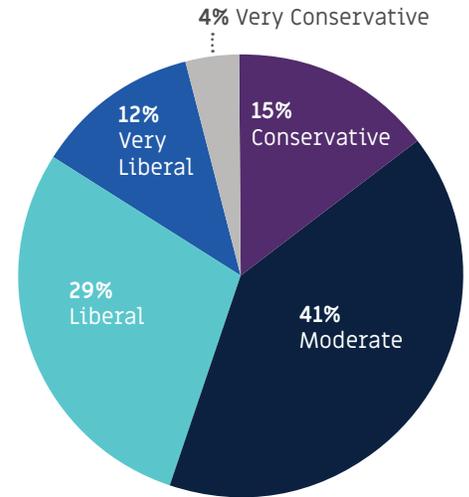
Participants by Institution



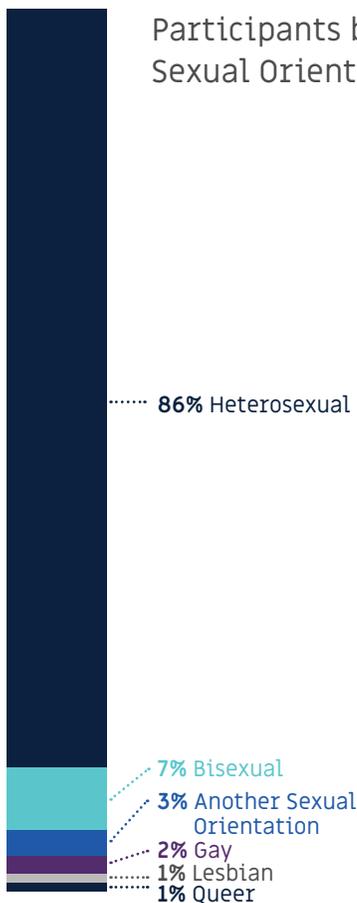
Participants by Gender



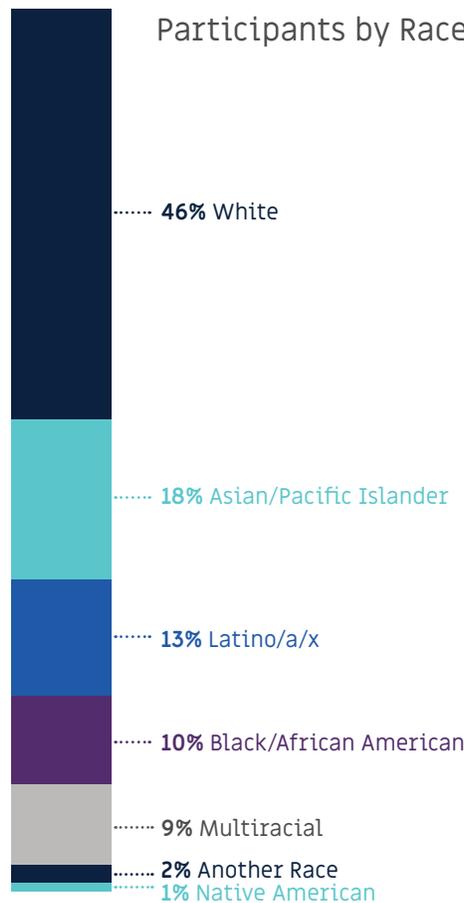
Participants by Political Leaning



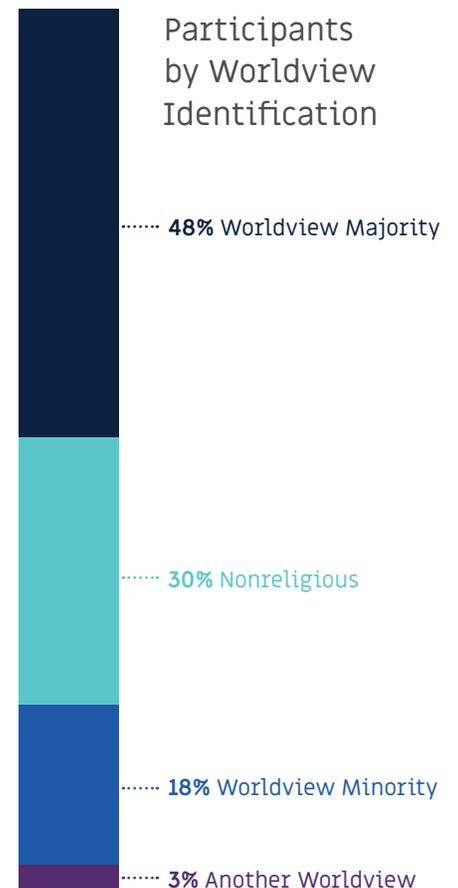
Participants by Sexual Orientation



Participants by Race



Participants by Worldview Identification



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