

# Emerging Interfaith Trends

What College Students Are Saying About Religion in 2016



**IDEALS**

INTERFAITH DIVERSITY  
EXPERIENCES & ATTITUDES  
LONGITUDINAL SURVEY

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As the divisive rhetoric presently dominating U.S. politics reverberates into citizens' daily interactions, institutions of higher education are faced with an ever-pressing call to develop citizens capable of addressing society's complex problems. Central to higher education's responsibility in this regard is educating and equipping students to effectively reach across lines of difference, including those related to religion. A deep-seated component of U.S. society, religion is sometimes seen as divisive; yet, it has great power to catalyze individuals toward positive aims. As such, key questions for educators and leaders include: How do students make meaning of their worldview identities? And, importantly, how do college students meaningfully engage across lines of worldview difference?





# IDEALS Overview

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) gauges college students' affinity for interreligious cooperation, their appreciation for various worldview groups, and their religious diversity expectations of higher education institutions.

IDEALS follows the fall 2015 cohort of first-term college students across four years of college to measure how interfaith attitudes and behaviors change over time, as well as determine the educational and social experiences that have the greatest impact on interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Incoming college students attending 122 U.S. colleges and universities shared their perspectives on religious and worldview diversity as part of this national, longitudinal study. The 20,436 college students who participated in the first wave of IDEALS in the summer and fall of 2015 were in their first term on campus and represented many different religious faiths and worldviews.

This report features findings from the first of three data collection efforts and provides a general narrative of today's incoming college students. The findings reveal opportunities for college educators to deepen students' engagement with worldview diversity. Although students generally have positive regard for interfaith cooperation, they seem to lack experience putting the value into practice. They also have potential to develop their worldview commitment and improve their relationships with and attitudes toward others of different worldviews.

## Terms



### WORLDVIEW

A guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, nonreligious perspective, or some combination of these

### PLURALISM ORIENTATION

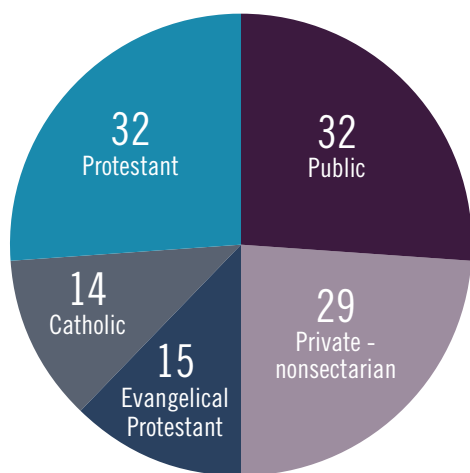
The extent to which students are accepting of others with different worldviews, believe that worldviews share many common values, consider it important to understand the differences between world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with diverse others and still hold to their own worldviews



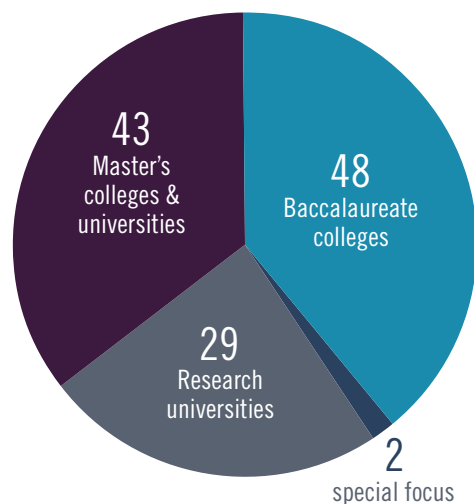
# Institutional Characteristics

122 Participating Institutions

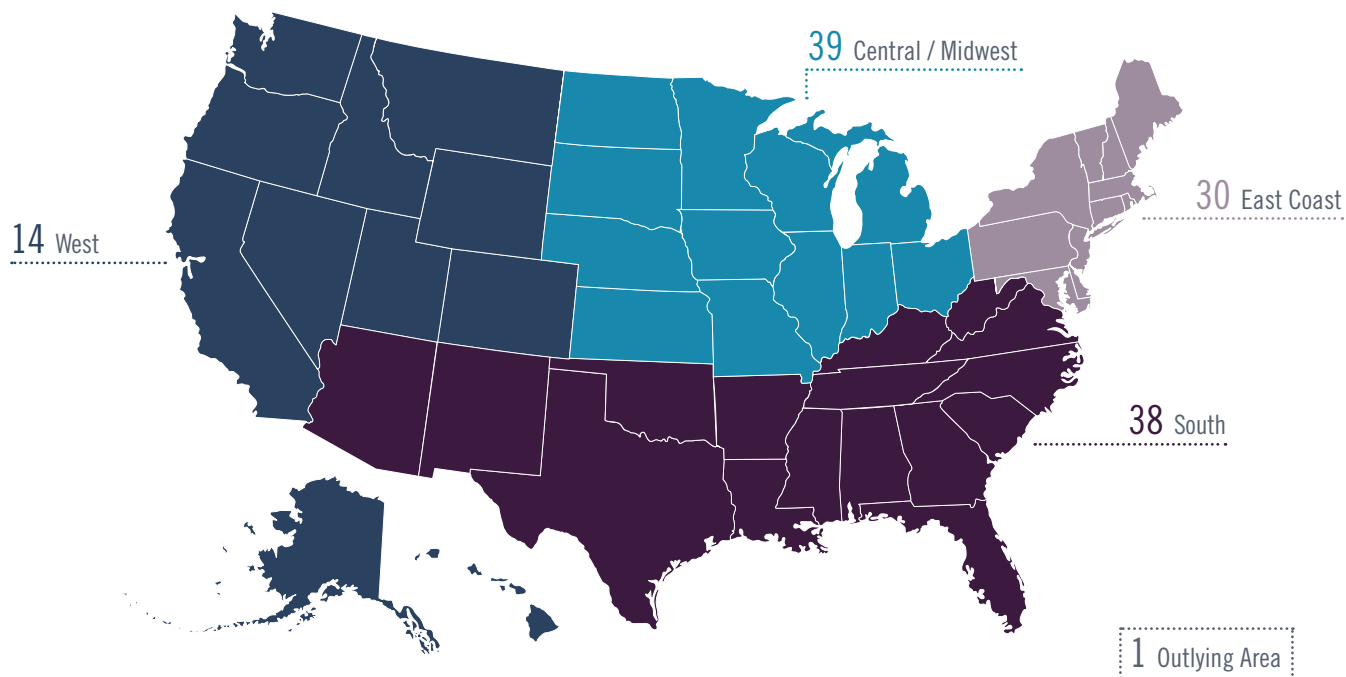
## Affiliation



## Carnegie Classification



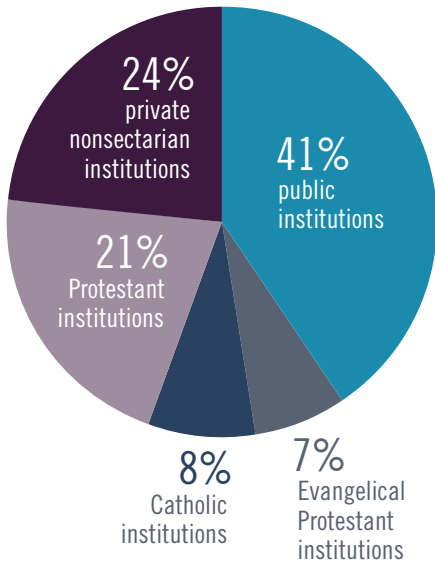
## Region



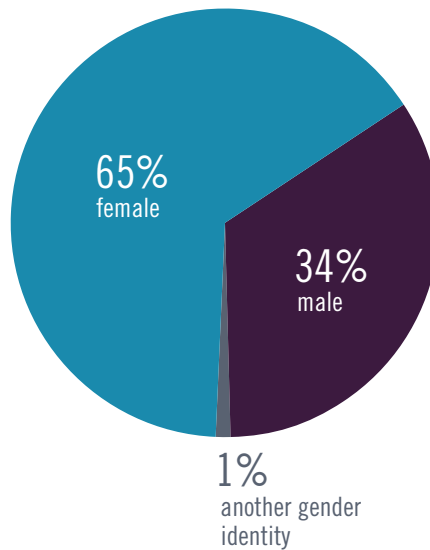
# IDEALS Sample

20,436 first-term students

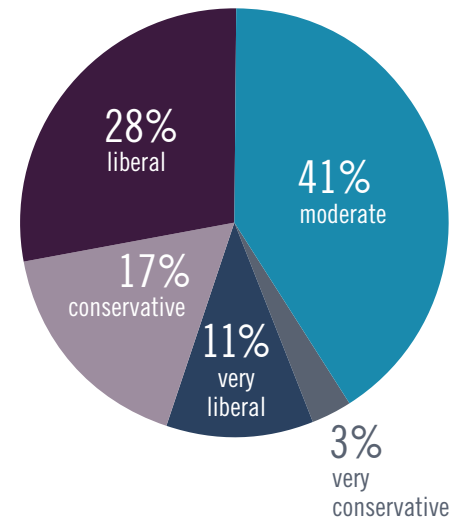
Participants by institution



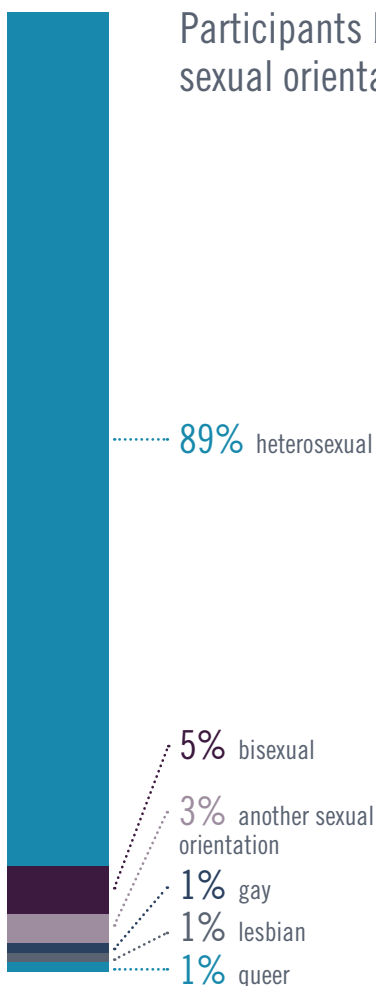
Participants by gender



Participants by political leaning



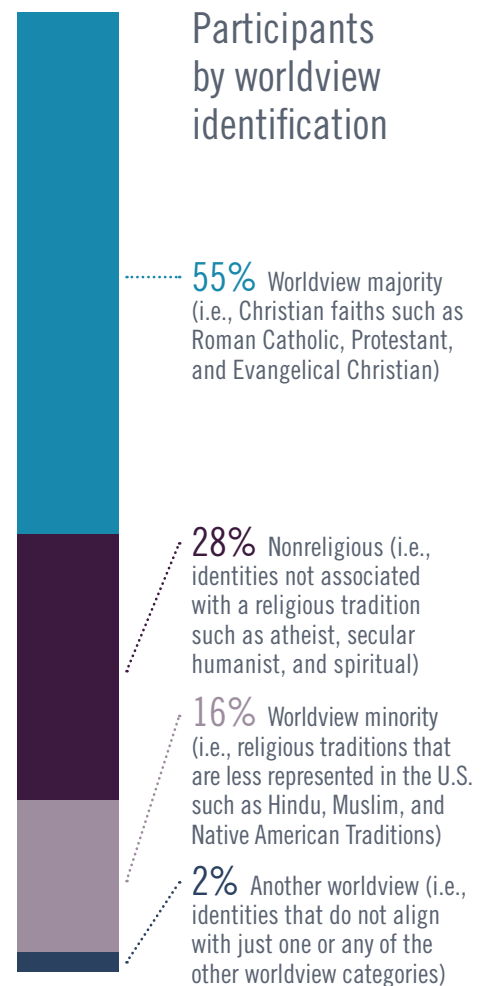
Participants by sexual orientation



Participants by race



Participants by worldview identification



# Worldview Commitment & Influences

On average, students are moderately committed to their worldviews. Many students report the strong influence of families on their worldviews.

IDEALS respondents identified with a wide array of worldviews—or guiding life philosophies—and diverged on questions about religious and spiritual self-perceptions: 41% characterized themselves as “both religious and spiritual,” 26% as “spiritual, but not religious,” 22% as “neither religious nor spiritual,” and 11% as “religious, but not spiritual.” When asked about their worldview commitment:

- 54% of participants had talked and listened to people with different viewpoints before committing to their own worldview.
- 52% of participants had integrated multiple points of view before committing to their own worldview.

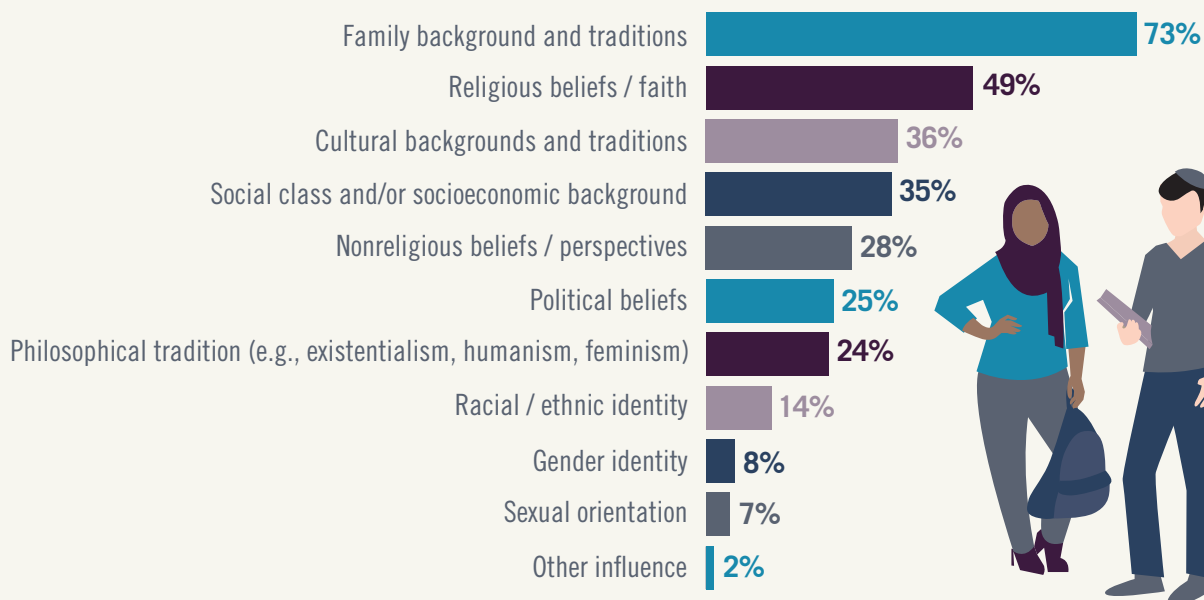
In other words, nearly half of the participants had not explored other worldviews in relation to their personal religious or nonreligious perspective. This lack of exploration could be attributed to minimal contact with people of diverse worldviews before college.

Incoming students rely on several key sources as they develop worldview commitments. When asked to report the top three factors that had most influenced their worldview, nearly three-quarters of students chose family background and traditions as one of the top three. Religious beliefs/faith and cultural background and traditions were two other factors endorsed as highly influential by a significant number of students (49% and 36% respectively). Yet, despite the salience of politics in this election year, only a quarter of students cited their political views as having a strong influence on their worldview.

Given the developmental stage of many incoming college students, it is not surprising to see families as a top influential factor. Students beginning college may have a tendency to rely on authority figures, such as parents or guardians, to help them define truth and make meaning of the world. However, as students progress in college, educators can play a critical role in encouraging them to refine and shape their worldviews in a way that closely reflects students’ own experiences and perceptions.

## Influences on Students’ Worldviews

Percentage of students who indicated the following influences as one of their top three:





# High Expectations of College

Students believe it is important for campuses to support their engagement of religious diversity.

Incoming students hold high expectations for their institutions to welcome people of diverse backgrounds. A sizable majority of students (85%) says it is “important” for their campuses to provide a welcoming environment for individuals of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives. Religious diversity is prioritized similarly to other aspects of campus inclusion, namely providing a welcoming environment for people of diverse races and ethnicities (89%) and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (77%).

In addition to a welcoming environment, entering students expect institutions to offer opportunities for them to meaningfully engage with individuals of other religious and nonreligious perspectives. A majority of students report that it is “important” or “very important” that colleges provide:

- Opportunities to get to know students of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives (71%);
- Opportunities to participate in community service with students of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives (68%); and
- Educational programs and courses that will help them learn about different religious traditions around the world (65%).

Students not only value welcoming campuses for diverse students; they also seek to engage others across lines of worldview difference. Although campuses often provide offices, student groups, or other resources to support individual worldview identity groups, are they prepared to help those different groups of students dialogue or work toward collective action through programs or interventions? Campuses need to be ready to provide formal experiences (e.g., interfaith service opportunities, classroom experiences, interfaith councils, speakers of various religious or secular perspectives) and informal catalysts (e.g., interfaith spaces, provocative bulletin boards/flyers, dining hall conversation cards) that encourage students to articulate and discuss their respective worldview identities.



# Students are Poised for Interfaith Cooperation

Students tend to support bridging worldview differences to make positive change in the world, yet, there seems to be a gap between students' espoused values and their actions.

First-term college students value interfaith collaboration and appear motivated to act on their values. In fact, more than three quarters of the survey participants responded in agreement that:

- We can overcome many of the world's major problems if people of different religious and nonreligious perspectives work together (83%);
- Cultivating interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place (81%); and
- Their worldviews inspire them to serve with others on issues of common concern (78%).

However, students' espoused values and their actions tend to be misaligned. When asked about their behaviors in the last 12 months, a limited number of students had participated in different forms of interfaith engagement:

- 50% worked with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives on a service project;
- 35% attended a religious service for a religious tradition other than their own; and
- 19% participated in interfaith dialogue.

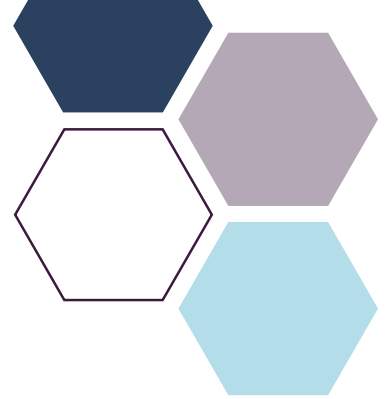
In light of the disparity between students' professed values and actual behaviors, educators may want to provide interventions and programs, such as interfaith service activities, interfaith dialogue programs, classroom interfaith modules, or other interfaith programming, that address these areas to better leverage student participation in interfaith cooperation.





# Appreciative Attitudes toward Diverse Others

Generally, students have a positive regard for others; yet, attitudes vary about specific populations.



Favorable attitudes toward people of other faiths, perspectives, and walks of life depend on the group a student has in mind. Most students affirm they respect people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives (91%) and agree that there are people of other faiths whom they admire (84%).

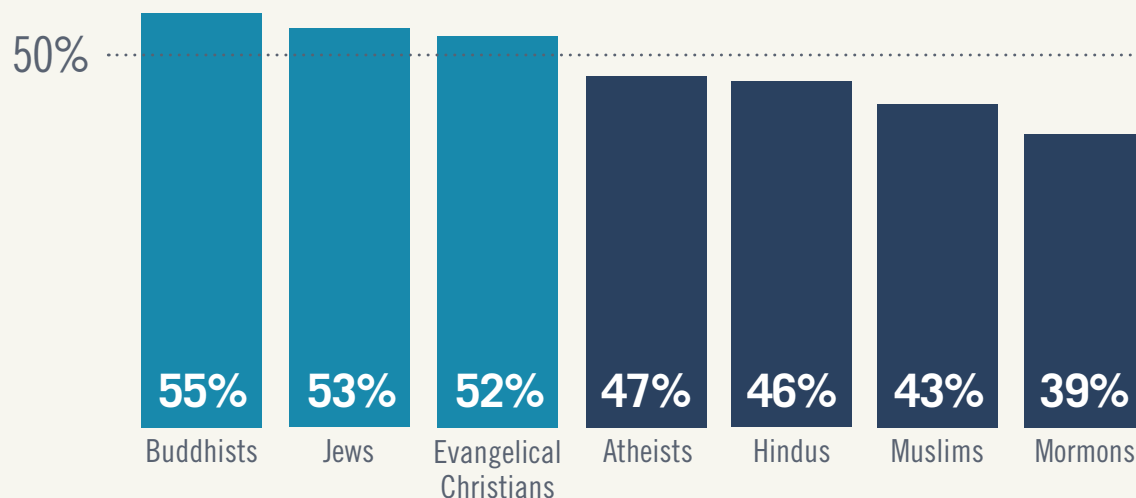
Appreciative attitudes vary, however, when students are asked about their impressions of specific groups. Students were prompted to respond to a series of four statements—“people in this group make positive contributions to society,” “individuals in this group are ethical people,” “I have things in common with people in this group,” and “in general, I have a positive attitude toward people in this group.” More than half of students surveyed reported highly appreciative attitudes toward Buddhists, Jews, and Evangelical Christians. However, impressions of other groups were more tenuous, with less than half

of students indicating highly appreciative attitudes toward atheists, Hindus, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints/Mormons.

Differences in favorable attitudes may be due in part to familiarity and interaction with people of other identities. In fact, students indicating that they have at least one close friend of a particular group tended to have greater appreciation for that group than students without such friendships.

Educators must be cognizant that although students claim they appreciate diverse others, there are particular populations about whom students are less inclined to have appreciative attitudes. At times, students may not be aware of the dissonance between their espoused value of diversity and the attitudes that they have toward specific others. Faculty and staff have the opportunity to bring this contradiction to the surface and help students make meaning of this dissonance.

## Percentage of Students Reporting High Appreciative Attitudes toward Specific Groups



# Considerations for Practice

Based on these findings, we recommend four practices to engage a cross-section of incoming students.

1

## Assess campus preparedness to support worldview diversity.

Incoming students come from diverse backgrounds, including religious and nonreligious perspectives. These students expect higher education institutions to provide welcoming environments to a diverse cross-section of students. As such, campus administrators should consider what programs, services, and policies exist to support students of various religious and nonreligious backgrounds.

2

## Integrate worldview diversity as a valued lens in multicultural education.

Campuses tend to emphasize race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity as important aspects of the multicultural community, yet worldview diversity is often left off this list. Entering students ascribe a similar degree of importance to worldview diversity as they do to race and sexual orientation/gender identity. Campuses should consider how they are integrating worldview diversity into the multicultural conversation and how staff, faculty, and paraprofessionals are trained to engage this diversity.

3

## Provide new interfaith opportunities and/or an interfaith lens on existing programs.

Students appear to value collaboration across worldview difference to improve our society. However, they do not seem to be practicing interfaith engagement to the same degree as they claim to value it. Educators should more explicitly provide interfaith opportunities in which students can participate. They could also capitalize on existing programs and add an interfaith frame to it, helping students to see experiences as interfaith opportunities.

4

## Highlight the positive contributions of diverse community members.

Many faculty, staff, students, and community members make inspiring contributions to our society. But, how often are these narratives associated with an individual's value system and worldview identity? Educators could encourage a campus culture where people's worldviews are celebrated as an aspect of their identities, affording students the opportunity to witness acts of service, generosity, and kindness among individuals of diverse worldviews.

This report provides an illuminating snapshot of incoming college students and provides campuses with helpful information to create purposeful interventions for interfaith cooperation. Although we highlight general findings from the first survey of IDEALS in this report, future reports will detail the unique narratives of particular populations. You can follow this evolving research at [www.ifyc.org/ideals](http://www.ifyc.org/ideals) as we continue to produce webinars, articles, and reports about IDEALS.



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