



IDEALS

INTERFAITH DIVERSITY
EXPERIENCES & ATTITUDES
LONGITUDINAL SURVEY

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Best Practices for Interfaith Learning and Development in the First Year of College

The first year of college is a time of considerable change. As students begin a new chapter of life, they are met with a host of challenges and opportunities that necessitate adjustments academically, socially, and personally. With the optimal blend of engaging curricular and co-curricular experiences, first-year students stand to grow in ways that will prepare them well for continued success. Some of the key developmental tasks in the first year of college include reflecting critically on personal beliefs and values, making commitments to a religious or nonreligious worldview that is personally relevant, becoming adept at productively interacting with peers of different backgrounds and worldviews, and appreciating and understanding those peers who orient around religion differently. As college educators consider ways to facilitate and support students in relation to these developmental aims, they may ask themselves: What are the best ways to do this? What conditions, educational practices, and experiences help first-year students to accomplish these milestones in their interfaith learning and development? Data from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) address this question and provide guidance for higher education leaders, practitioners, and faculty who seek to support students in making the most of their first critical year on campus.

What conditions, educational practices, and experiences help first-year students to accomplish these milestones in their interfaith learning and development?



In 2015-16, 7,194 first-year students attending 122 colleges and universities participated in IDEALS—a national study that assesses students' experiences on campus related to religious diversity and interfaith engagement, and tracks changes in outcomes such as their religious diversity attitudes and behaviors across the college years. Students responded to an initial survey in Fall 2015 as they began their first year of college, and to a subsequent survey at the end of that academic year.

Important trends surfaced in the first-year data, including increases in appreciative attitudes toward different social identity groups, decreases in interfaith engagement, and opportunities to close the resulting gap between attitudes and behaviors. These can be explored in [*Navigating Pluralism: How Students Approach Religious Difference and Interfaith Engagement in Their First Year of College*](#), available at idealsresearch.org. This report builds on the broader findings featured in *Navigating Pluralism* with an eye toward educational practices, and examines relationships between collegiate experiences and first-year students' interfaith learning and development. Each outcome was examined in relation to 61 distinct campus experiences. This report focuses on the ten experiences that had the strongest relationships with each of the following outcomes: appreciative attitudes toward specific social identity groups, self-authored worldview commitment, appreciative knowledge, and pluralism orientation.

Common Top Ten Practices

When looking at the “top ten” experiences and conditions related to students' interfaith learning and development, the following surfaced as having positive influences on multiple outcomes of interest:

- Learning about religious diversity on campus through orientation or other required events.
- Having discussions with someone of another worldview that positively influence one's perceptions of that worldview.
- Having discussions with someone that make one feel like they do not know enough about their own worldview.
- Having discussions with someone from one's own worldview with whom one disagrees.
- Having class discussions that challenge one to rethink their assumptions about another worldview.
- Feeling challenged to rethink assumptions about another worldview after someone explains their worldview.
- Having faculty and staff on campus who accommodate student needs with regard to celebrating religious holidays and other important religious observances.
- Having a place on campus where one can express their personal worldview.
- Having classes that are safe places to express one's worldview.
- Feeling the campus is a safe place to express one's worldview.



Appreciative Attitudes Toward Diverse Others

Appreciative attitudes are considered positive dispositions that reflect respect, admiration, and high regard toward different identity groups.

Appreciative Attitudes Grow in Balanced Environments

A combination of safe and brave spaces sets the stage for developing appreciative attitudes toward different social identity groups.

IDEALS gauges students' appreciative attitudes toward people in thirteen different social identity groups, including people of other worldviews, political ideologies, sexualities, gender identities, races, and countries. The survey asks students whether they believe that individuals in each group make positive contributions to society and are ethical people; it also asks if students feel they have things in common with members of each identity group and whether they hold positive attitudes toward people in those groups. When all thirteen appreciative attitude scores are considered together, the top ten facilitators of positive change include both supportive experiences and provocative encounters, the latter being akin to "brave spaces" distinguished by social justice educators (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Students who become more appreciative of other social identity groups affirm the following:

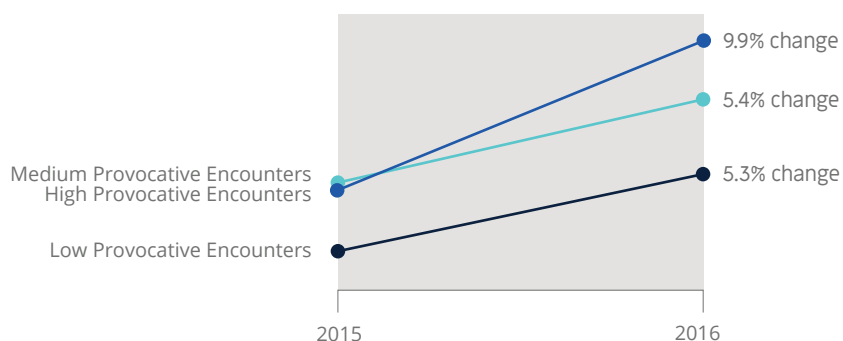
- My classes are safe places for me to express my worldview
- There is a place on this campus where I can express my personal worldview
- This campus is a safe place for me to express my worldview
- Faculty and staff on my campus accommodate my needs with regard to celebrating religious holidays and other important religious observances



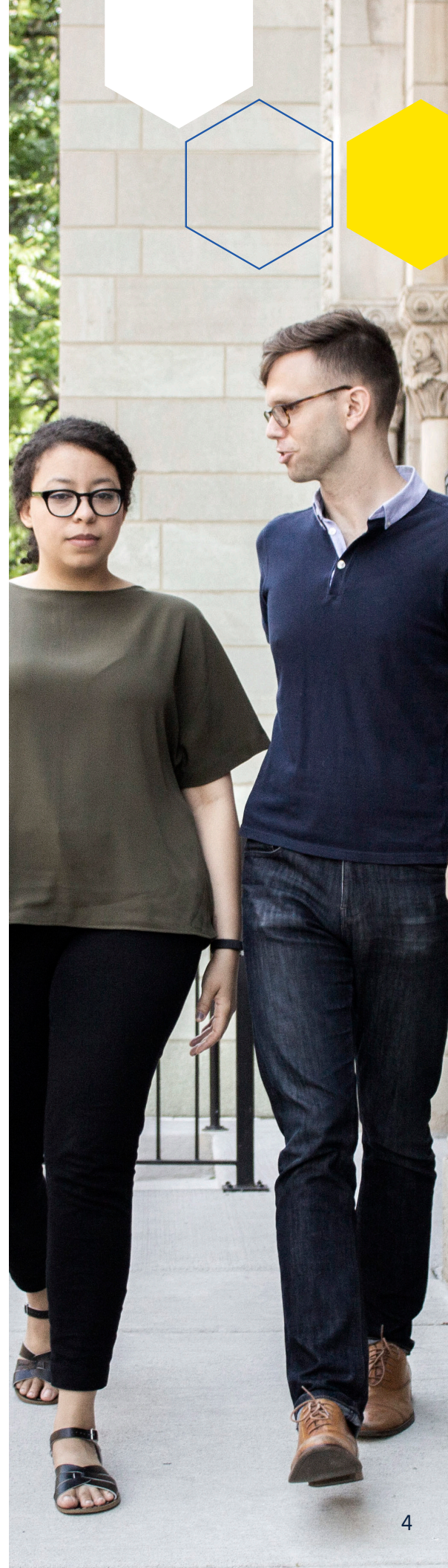
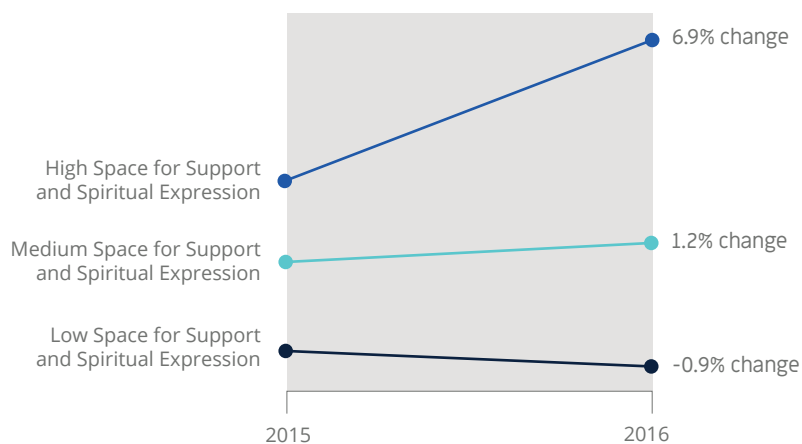
Brave spaces, in which students accept some degree of risk as they engage conversations about religious and worldview diversity, are also imperative for attitudinal change. Students who indicate having “provocative encounters with worldview diversity” in college tend to express more appreciation for other social identity groups by the end of their first year. We observed growth in appreciative attitudes when students:

- Had a discussion with someone of another worldview that had a positive influence on their perceptions of that worldview
- Felt challenged to rethink their assumptions about another worldview after someone explained their worldview
- Had class discussions that challenged them to rethink their assumptions about another worldview
- Had a discussion with someone that made them feel like they did not know enough about their own worldview

Rate of change in overall appreciative attitudes by level of experience with provocative encounters:



Rate of change in overall appreciative attitudes by perceived space for support and spiritual expression:





Key Terms

Worldview Majority

Christian faiths such as Evangelical Christian, Protestant, and Roman Catholic.

Worldview Minority

Faith traditions that have a smaller number of adherents in the U.S. such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Native American Traditions and others.

Nonreligious

Groups not associated with a religious tradition such as atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists.

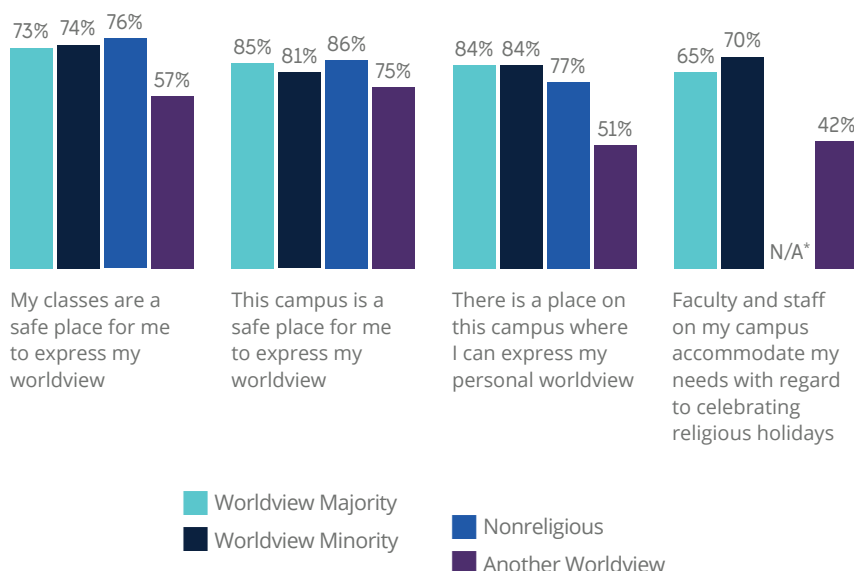
Another Worldview

Identities that do not align with just one or any of the other worldview categories.

Knowing that a balance of supportive and challenging experiences is necessary to promote growth in students' appreciative attitudes toward others, a natural question arises as to how students of different worldviews report feeling supported or challenged. Do students of all worldviews feel supported and safe to express their personal perspectives and convictions? Comparisons of worldview majority students, worldview minority students, nonreligious students, and students of another worldview revealed several noteworthy differences. For instance, approximately three-quarters of worldview majority, worldview minority, and nonreligious students feel safe expressing themselves in class, but students of other worldview identities feel demonstrably less safe in classroom settings (just 57% agree their classes are safe places for expression of their own worldview). A similar pattern holds when students are asked whether they feel the campus in general is a safe place to express their worldview. Meanwhile, eighty-four percent of students with religious perspectives—whether they hold majority or minority worldviews—agree that there is a place on campus where they can express their personal worldview. However, a smaller share of nonreligious students (77%) and students of other worldviews (51%) believe they have a place for worldview expression on campus. Two-thirds or more of worldview majority (65%) and minority (70%) students agree that faculty and staff accommodate their needs regarding celebrating religious holidays. Fewer students of other worldviews (42%) agree—perhaps because accommodations for religious observances are less relevant for this group.

...students of other worldview identities feel demonstrably less safe in classroom...

Percent of students who agree with the following statements:



*Nonreligious student responses were not reported for items that are not applicable to them.



As with space for support and spiritual expression, a few differences by worldview surfaced in relation to provocative encounters. For the most part, worldview majority, worldview minority, and nonreligious students reported similar rates of personal or class discussions that challenged them to rethink assumptions or discussions that had a positive influence on their perceptions of another worldview. Yet students of other worldviews reported lower rates of such encounters. Moreover, while 76% of worldview majority students and 78% of worldview minority students reported having a discussion with someone that made them feel like they did not know enough about their own worldview, the same was true of 67% of nonreligious students and just 32% of students identifying with other worldviews. The differences between groups may be a reflection of students' confidence in their beliefs, the nature of the conversations students are having, the context in which conversations are occurring, as well with whom students are having them.



ReFlection for Practice

- What spaces and networks exist on your campus to support students of different worldviews? Are there particular worldview identity groups that could use targeted support?
- To what degree do you provide programming or opportunities that encourage challenging conversations? Are there existing activities in which you could incorporate prompts or experiences that spark deeper student dialogue about worldview?
- Most importantly, what is the balance between support networks and brave spaces on your campus? Are certain worldview groups challenged more than supported (or vice versa) on your campus? What steps could you take to provide better balance for these specific groups?



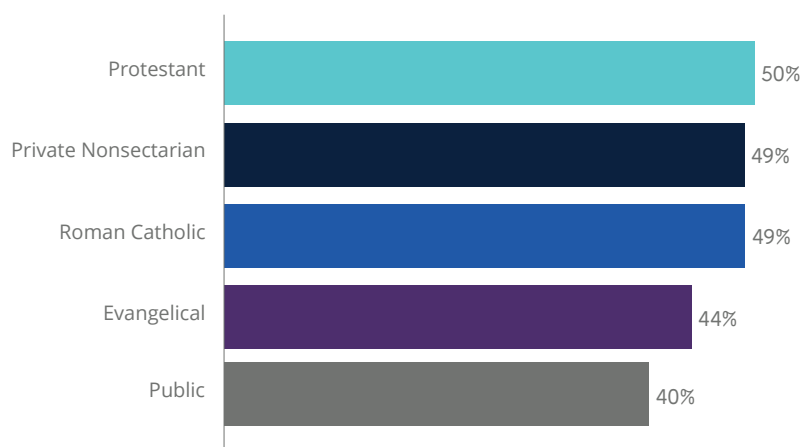
Interfaith Experiences Matter in Orientation and Curricular Programs

Opportunities to learn about religious diversity in first-year orientation or interfaith studies programs are associated with growth in students' appreciative attitudes, but such opportunities are uneven across different institution types.

Participation in orientation programming or other required first-year events positively influences appreciative attitudes among students in their first collegiate year. Those who learn about religious diversity in these settings have more favorable attitudes toward people of other social identity groups by the end of the first year of college.

IDEALS data reveal that building religious diversity education into first-year orientation programming takes place at public and private institutions alike; however, it does not occur to the same degree in all higher education contexts. Whereas close to half of students attending Protestant (50%), private nonsectarian (49%), and Roman Catholic (49%) institutions reported exposure to religious diversity education in orientation or other required campus events, only 40% and 44% of students attending public and Evangelical colleges and universities, respectively, reported the same.

Percent of students reporting religious diversity education through orientation or other required events by institution type:



Regarding an academic experience with high-impact potential, students who pursued a minor or concentration in interfaith studies by and large were more appreciative of other social identity groups by the end of the first year of college relative to students who did not engage in interfaith studies. Across the board, few students pursued an interfaith studies minor or concentration. Only 2-3% of students attending Roman Catholic, Protestant, private nonsectarian, or public colleges and universities took advantage of such an opportunity, if available. However, one in ten students attending Evangelical Protestant colleges and universities pursued an interfaith minor or concentration, perhaps because such opportunities are more readily available at Evangelical institutions.



ReFlection for Practice

When considering the integration of interfaith activities into orientation or required programming, one may initially think of adding new initiatives. However, might opportunities exist on your campus to infuse interfaith learning or activities into existing programs?

- How could a religious diversity lens be utilized in existing conversations that address diversity more generally?
- What are ways that your campus community's religious diversity could be celebrated (e.g., via students, staff, faculty, local community partners)?

What are ways diverse religious/nonreligious narratives and interfaith learning can be integrated into the curriculum?

- What common readings might you consider using to help students better understand a particular religious tradition and/or observe positive cooperation across religious worldview differences?
- If available, how well are interfaith curricular opportunities promoted among first-year students? How do you help first-year students see the value that an interfaith concentration or minor can bring to their personal lives and professional careers?



Various Formal and Informal Interfaith Experiences Influence Attitudes Toward Others

A number of curricular, co-curricular, and informal experiences with worldview diversity have the potential to change attitudes toward specific social identity groups.

Experiences spanning academic and social domains surfaced as meaningful contributors to students' attitudes toward specific identity groups. In the academic realm, students who have the opportunity to discuss their personal worldviews in class make gains in positive attitudes toward atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, people of other races, and people from other countries. Co-curricular initiatives can also inspire attitude change: participating in voluntary community service is associated with growth in appreciative attitudes toward Evangelical Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and politically conservative people.

Informal social experiences play an important role in facilitating appreciative attitude development toward several groups as well. Students who socialize with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives tend to have greater appreciation of Jews, transgender people, and people of other races by the end of the first college year compared to students with lower levels of interreligious social interaction. Likewise, dining with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives sparks appreciation for Jews, people of other races, and people of other countries.

A few other experiences uniquely relate to growth in positive attitudes toward specific identity groups:

- Discussing other students' religious and nonreligious perspectives in class relates to appreciation of atheists
- Using a multifaith space is associated with students' appreciative attitudes toward Muslims
- Attending an interfaith prayer vigil/memorial on campus is related to appreciation of politically liberal people
- Attending a lecture or panel discussing religious diversity or interfaith cooperation is associated with appreciation of people from another country



Reflection for Practice

- Of the myriad interfaith opportunities that engender appreciative attitudes toward different worldview groups, which do you currently provide on your campus? How extensively do students participate in these activities?
- What are some ways you can work with colleagues across campus to ensure co-curricular and curricular interfaith experiences are taking place in concert with one another? What offices or functional areas could you tap for cross-campus collaborations?
- If attitudes are lower toward particular social identity groups on your campus, what interfaith activities might you prioritize? How can you use the information in this report to inform targeted interventions?



Self-Authored Worldview Commitment

Self-authored worldview commitment describes a process by which an individual adopts a worldview philosophy informed by a thoughtful and responsible examination of their own beliefs through engaging others' diverse—and sometimes conflicting—views on religion and spirituality.

Thoughtfully Committing to One's Worldview is Sparked by Challenging Conversations and Interactions with Faculty

Provocative encounters with worldview diversity and faculty engagement and support are linked to gains in self-authored worldview commitment.

Self-authored worldview commitment is a measure that reflects the degree to which students thoughtfully consider other religious and nonreligious perspectives, reconcile competing religious and nonreligious perspectives, integrate multiple points of view into their existing worldview, and talk and listen to people with points of view different than their own before committing to their own worldview.

IDEALS revealed that students thoughtfully and carefully considered their worldview commitments more often relative to their peers when they:

- Had a discussion with someone of another worldview that had a positive influence on their perceptions of that worldview
- Felt challenged to rethink their assumptions about another worldview after someone explained their worldview
- Had class discussions that challenged them to rethink their assumptions about another worldview

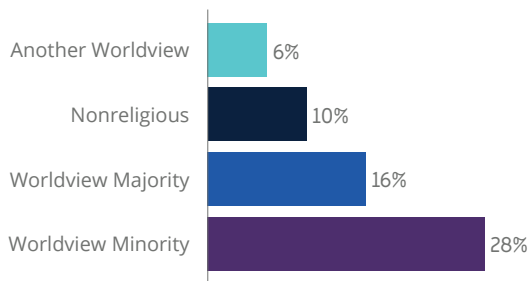
Even encounters that may be unsettling for students are correlated with growth...

Even encounters that may be unsettling for students are correlated with growth, including:

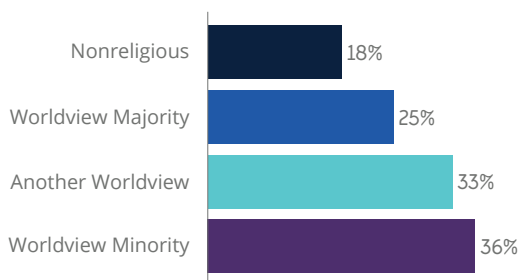
- Hearing critical comments from others that made the student question their worldview
- Having a discussion with someone that made the student feel like they did not know enough about their own worldview
- Having a discussion with someone from their own worldview with whom they disagreed

Interfaith dialogue is associated with thoughtful and careful worldview commitments at the end of the first year of college, perhaps because such dialogue provides a setting for provocative encounters. At the same time, participation in interfaith dialogue varies widely by worldview identity. More than one-quarter of worldview minority students (28%) have been part of an interfaith dialogue, but rates of involvement are much lower among worldview majority students (16%), nonreligious students (10%), and students of other worldviews (6%).

Percent of students who have engaged in interfaith dialogue by worldview identity:



Percent of students who discuss religious or spiritual topics with faculty by worldview identity:



Faculty and staff play a critical role in fostering thoughtful and careful commitment as well; when students feel that faculty and staff accommodate needs with regard to celebrating religious holidays and other religious observances, they tend to have higher levels of commitment after a year of college than students who do not feel accommodated. The same is true of students who discuss religious or spiritual topics with faculty. Discussions of religious or spiritual topics between students and faculty happen most often at Evangelical institutions (58%), followed by Roman Catholic institutions (43%), Protestant institutions (34%), private nonsectarian institutions (28%), and public colleges and universities (22%). Moreover, worldview minority students (36%) and students of other worldviews (33%) are the most inclined toward such discussions with faculty relative to their peers. One-quarter of worldview majority students and 18% of nonreligious students reported religious or spiritual conversations with faculty in their first year of college.



Reflection for Practice

- Challenging conversations can be integrated into a number of curricular and co-curricular spaces on campus. On your campus, where are students able to build trusting relationships with peers to talk through differences in their beliefs?
- To what extent do faculty on your campus feel comfortable and encouraged when it comes to conversing about religion and spirituality with students?
- Nonreligious students engage in conversations about religion, spirituality, or worldview less often than their peers. What might prevent them from entering into these conversations and how can you foster greater participation?



Appreciative Knowledge

Appreciative knowledge describes one's familiarity with teachings, traditions, rituals, practices, or people that reflect positive attributes of different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious worldviews.

Casual Interactions Are Key to Increasing Appreciative Knowledge Toward Different Identity Groups

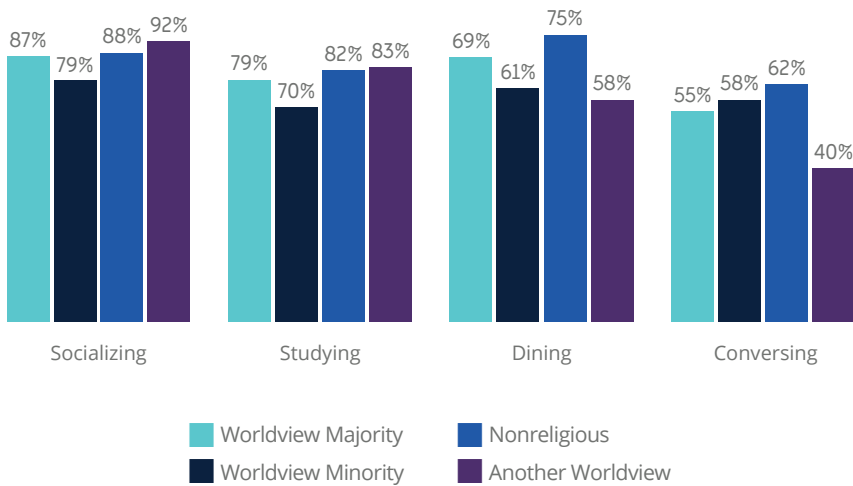
Socializing with people of other worldviews holds the most promise for fostering appreciative knowledge.

IDEALS assesses students' appreciative knowledge through an eight-item quiz that determines the extent to which students are knowledgeable about the positive attributes of a variety of religious traditions and nonreligious perspectives. We found that socializing, studying, dining, and having conversations with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective are most strongly related to appreciative knowledge after one year of college.

On the whole, most students reported socializing with peers of other worldviews, although rates varied somewhat by worldview identity; 92% of students of other worldviews socialized with people of other religious or nonreligious perspectives, followed by 88% of nonreligious students, 87% of worldview majority students, and 79% of worldview minority students. Rates of studying across worldview lines were also quite high—in the 70-80% range—and followed a similar pattern in terms of the worldview groups that were the most and least engaged. Fewer students, but still a majority in most cases, dined and had conversations with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives. Nonreligious students were the most engaged in dining and conversational experiences, while students of other worldviews were the least engaged in both.



Percent of students who have engaged in different types of informal interfaith engagement by worldview identity:



Reflection for Practice

Informal interactions with peers are difficult for college educators to directly influence. However, faculty and staff can create conditions to promote casual engagement between students of different religious/nonreligious beliefs.

- To what degree is there a culture of open conversation about worldview and in what ways is such behavior modeled by faculty and staff?
- What passive programming (e.g., bulletin boards, table tents) could spark interfaith engagement among peers?
- Are there physical spaces on campus that are typically utilized by students from different worldview groups? Could strategic efforts be made to facilitate informal interactions? For instance, perhaps offices for the Hindu student group and Secular Student Alliance could be placed next to each other, or prayer spaces for Christians and Muslims located near each other.



Pluralism Orientation

Pluralism orientation is 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 worldview.

A Wide Range of Practices Result in Pluralism Growth

Gains in pluralism orientation during the first year of college are associated with a number of best practices for establishing enriching collegiate interfaith environments.



Providing space for support and spiritual expression



Facilitating provocative encounters



Embedding religious diversity in first-year orientation



Promoting religious and spiritual discussions with faculty



Encouraging informal religious diversity encounters

Students, on average, begin and end the first year of college with a strong pluralism orientation—a measure of global-mindedness, goodwill toward people of other worldviews, understanding of interreligious differences and similarities, and commitment to interfaith leadership and service. Given that many incoming college students already have a robust commitment to pluralism, what experiences help to deepen these commitments even further? Many of the experiences highlighted in relation to appreciative attitudes, self-authored worldview commitment, and appreciative knowledge are similarly associated with students' gains in pluralism orientation across the first year of college. That is, students are more pluralistically oriented at the end of the first year of college when they:

- Find supportive spaces for their worldviews
- Feel challenged through conversations in and beyond their classes to rethink assumptions and stereotypes about other worldviews
- Learn about religious diversity through orientation or other required events

In addition, participating in campus multicultural activities appears to yield gains in students' overall pluralism orientation

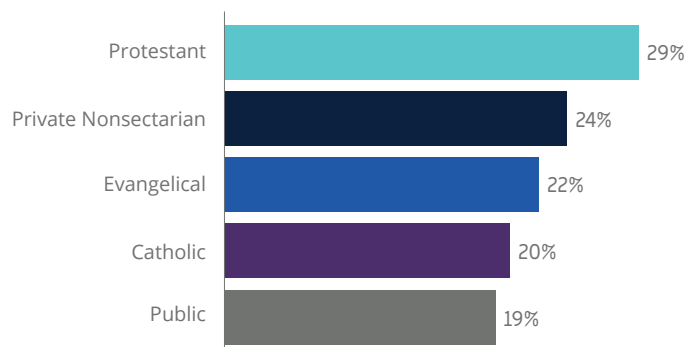
Several other campus experiences are associated with particular dimensions of pluralism. Discussing religious or spiritual topics with faculty is associated with growth in global-mindedness. Likewise, various informal diversity interactions play a role: socializing, dining, and having conversations with people of other worldviews further feelings of goodwill and respect toward diverse religious and nonreligious



groups. Socializing with someone of another worldview appears to support students' understanding of interreligious similarities and differences. And having conversations with people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives is correlated with growing commitments to interfaith leadership and service.

Finally, brainstorming a solution to a societal issue by working with students from other worldviews is associated with commitment to interfaith leadership and service. While not a "top ten" experience across the board, this practice nonetheless maintained statistically significant relationships with other pluralism dimensions as well—global-mindedness, goodwill toward people of other worldviews, and understanding interreligious similarities and differences. Approximately one-in-five students who identify with a worldview minority group (23%), as nonreligious (22%), or as part of a worldview majority group (20%) brainstormed with peers of other perspectives; 29% of students of other worldviews did the same. Students at Protestant institutions reported the most opportunities for brainstorming activities (29%), while students at public colleges and universities reported the fewest opportunities (19%).

Percent of students reporting they brainstormed a solution to a societal issue by working with students from other religious and nonreligious perspectives by institution type:



Reflection for Practice

- How might you apply the finding that engagement in multicultural activities is associated with pluralism growth? Could multicultural events be cross-promoted with interfaith activities? How can campus programs give greater attention to the intersections between religious and cultural identities?
- Bringing together people of different worldviews to conceptualize social change is important for different aspects of pluralism development; in what curricular and co-curricular spaces do students have opportunities to collectively brainstorm solutions to social problems? Community service and volunteer programs? Courses using problem-based curricula? Interfaith internships?





Looking Forward

In exploring practices that impact first-year growth, the IDEALS project is beginning to illuminate conditions, activities, and behaviors that foster student development and enable them to positively engage with diverse religious and nonreligious communities. With this knowledge, campus educators have the power and responsibility to create transformative environments that cultivate hearts and minds to build bridges in our society. Our call is for higher education faculty and staff to contemplate these findings, discern ways to integrate practices within their relative contexts, and join the movement to foster students' commitment to pluralism through meaningful interfaith engagement.

The findings discussed in this report yield several trends for educators to be mindful of as they engage religious diversity in the classroom and in co-curricular programs and activities. To recap key points:

- Intentional spaces for interfaith engagement – both supportive and brave – have a positive impact on students' appreciative attitudes toward others when appropriately balanced.
- First-year experiences, particularly formal orientation programming and curricular content, can be powerful avenues for students to consider both their own worldview commitment and their attitudes towards peers of different worldviews.
- Casual, unprogrammed encounters with those of different worldviews are among the most important drivers of appreciative attitudes toward others and higher levels of appreciative knowledge, especially in the first year. Campus leaders can create optimal conditions for these encounters to happen through thoughtful use of campus spaces and events.
- No one practice acts as a panacea for reinforcing pluralistic values. Rather, multiple experiences, both in and out of the classroom, lead to growth in students' pluralism orientation.

With these findings in mind, we encourage practitioners to review their own campus climate and context for opportunities to integrate practices highlighted in this report. For more IDEALS insights, visit idealsresearch.org.

Also consider putting these learnings into conversation with practical tools from Interfaith Youth Core. The Campus Interfaith Inventory is a valuable tool to help you identify opportunities to advance interfaith efforts on your campus. If you're looking for program ideas or practical guides for various aspects of campus interfaith work, visit IFYC's free library of online resources, created in partnership with campus faculty, administrators, and students.



References

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (1st ed., pp. 135-150). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

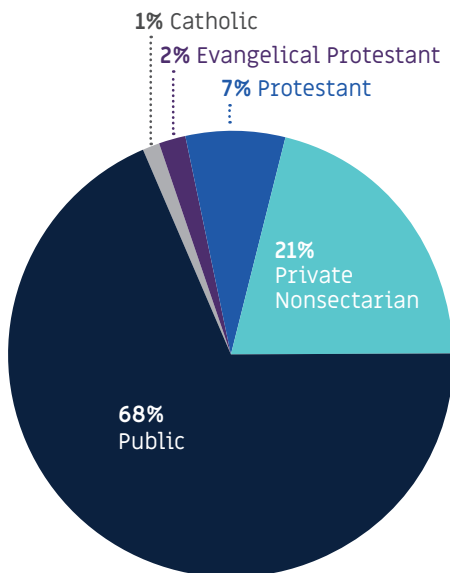


IDEALS Sample

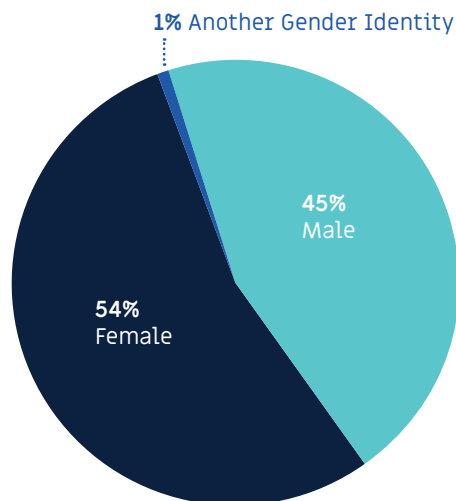
7,194 first-year students

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

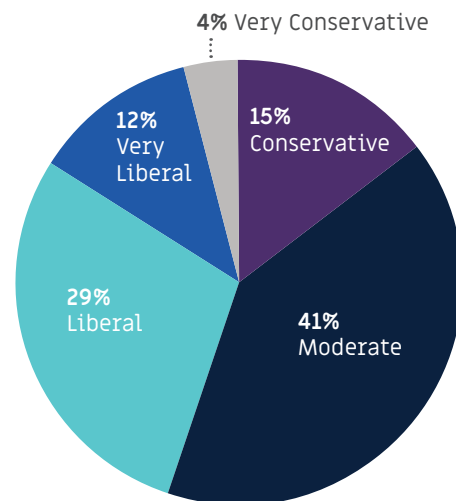
Participants by Institution



Participants by Gender



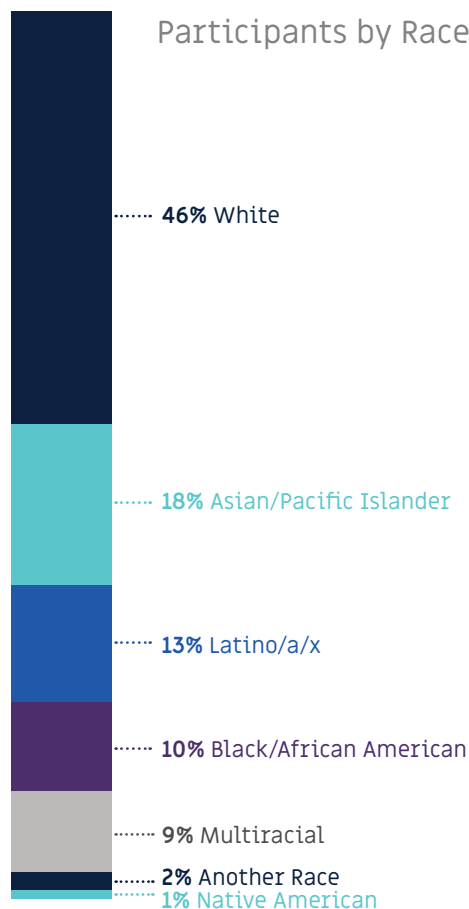
Participants by Political Leaning



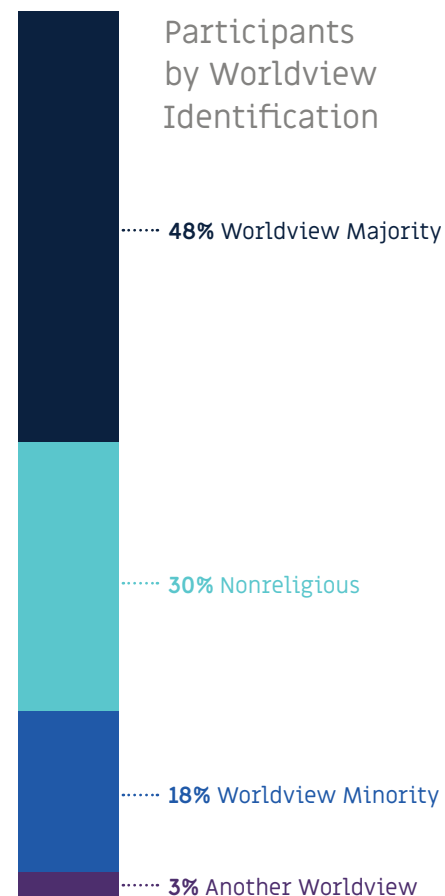
Participants by Sexual Orientation



Participants by Race



Participants by Worldview Identification



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