

Bridging Religious Divides through Higher Education



# IDEALS: Bridging Religious Divides through Higher Education

Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Matthew J. Mayhew, Mary Ellen Giess,  
Shauna M. Morin, B. Ashley Staples, Benjamin P. Correia-Harker & Associates



# Contents

- 4 Introduction
- 7 Student Perspectives on Bridging Religious Divides
- 12 The Promise of Interfaith Friendships
- 14 Campus Climate for Religiously Diverse Communities
- 20 A Need for Greater Religious Literacy
- 23 Student Attitudes at the Intersection of Religion and Politics
- 26 Recommendations
- 31 Citations
- 32 Appendix





# Introduction

- ▶ The United States is undergoing a massive demographic change. Immigration has fueled significant population growth for more than half a century, and the immigrant share of the population is approaching a record high.<sup>i</sup> Meanwhile, Millennials now outnumber Baby Boomers and Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation of Americans. The transformation underway across our national landscape will culminate in 2045 when it is anticipated the U.S. will become a “majority minority” country.<sup>ii</sup> The impact of those demographic changes will play out in all aspects of American life and are already deepening the country’s political divisions.

Meanwhile, fear and anxiety in this historic moment are driving Americans apart rather than uniting them against a common threat. As George Packer argued in *The Atlantic*, the Covid-19 pandemic is revealing what was already broken in our democracy.<sup>iii</sup>

The new realities brought on by Covid-19 exacerbate the challenges we are currently facing as a nation. Amid an already fractured political and civic landscape, physical distancing is pushing Americans further into insulated communities.

The insularity and division laid bare by the pandemic has long been entangled with profound shifts in U.S. religious diversity. Robert P. Jones’s recent book, aptly titled *The Death of White Christian America*, captures some of these demographic transformations. For example, though Christians continue to comprise the religious majority, their proportion is declining compared to other religious groups and white Christians already make up less than half of the American public.<sup>iv</sup>



Simultaneously, non-Christian religious groups like Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims are increasing in size, and all of America's youngest religious groups are non-Christian. One of the fastest-growing demographics in the U.S. is the religiously unaffiliated, a complex and often misunderstood group including people who identify as atheist, agnostic, secular, or spiritual. Frequently termed religious "nones," this group is disproportionately comprised of younger Americans.<sup>v</sup>

These profound shifts in the religious and secular identities of Americans urgently require attention. Scholars like Robert Putnam have warned for some time that increased diversity, when left unengaged, can threaten social cohesion. According to researchers in the 2018 report *Hidden Tribes*, we have already become "a set of tribes with different codes, values, and even facts" that fuel distrust and political polarization.<sup>vi</sup>

The trends we are seeing across the U.S. civic landscape—deepening divisions, lack of mutual understanding, and even loathing of the "other"—are antithetical to our founding national ethos of *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

Especially troubling is the increase in religiously-motivated marginalization and violence that is taking place alongside the increasing political polarization in our country, including but not limited to sharply increasing incidents of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.<sup>vii</sup> Even in everyday life, the civic and professional communities we belong to are being shaped and challenged by deep religious divides. In short, the stakes could not be higher for America to address religious diversity more adequately.

Navigating this new landscape is no longer a choice for most Americans. The changing demographics of our nation require nearly every American adult to possess skills to bridge religious divides. Research from the Public Religion Research Institute specifically underscores the relevance of religious diversity in the workplace, indicating that most Americans encounter religious diversity at work far more frequently than in other facets of their lives.<sup>viii</sup> Employers are therefore emphasizing the need for a workforce that possesses strong civic knowledge and intercultural skills, and whose members are equipped to solve problems with people whose views differ from their own.<sup>ix</sup> The need for such a workforce during the Covid-19 crisis is especially pressing in myriad professional sectors.

Higher education is distinct in its capacity to prepare graduates for effective engagement within our religiously diverse society. Its deep commitment to the next generation of citizens and tomorrow's workforce is central to its role in American society. Colleges and universities have long made concerted efforts to advance diversity in the areas of race, gender, and sexual orientation; however, religion has been continuously de-prioritized as an aspect of diversity work on most campuses.



Given the unique potential of higher education to lead the way in responding to the new religious and civic realities in America, an essential question emerges: to what extent is the collegiate experience preparing students to be successful leaders in our religiously diverse society?

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), led by Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach at North Carolina State University, Dr. Matthew J. Mayhew at The Ohio State University, and Interfaith Youth Core, attempts to answer this question. Motivated by a profound desire to foster bridge building across religious differences, the IDEALS research team conducted an unprecedented national study examining student perceptions of—and engagement with—religious diversity throughout their college careers. The study included a nationally representative sample of students on 122 campuses who were surveyed at three time points: when they entered college, after their first year, and in the spring semester of their senior year in 2019. The findings in this report represent insights gleaned from IDEALS participants over the entire course of their time in college. They illuminate ways that students are—or are not—learning to build bridges across lines of religious difference and highlight how higher education can take the lead to heal the deep divisions facing our nation today.

### **Worldview...**

describes a person's religious, spiritual, or nonreligious outlook on life.

### **Interfaith...**

represents the coming together of people who orient around religion differently.

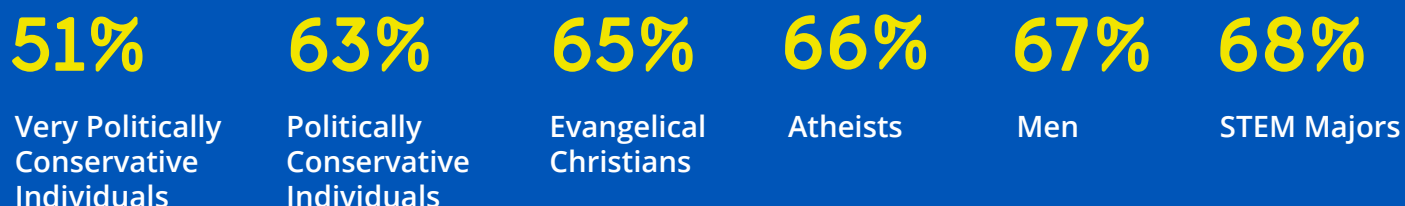


# Students see the importance of bridging religious divides, but few pursue opportunities to do so.

- It is promising in these times of deep division that today's college students place a high value on diversity and believe in the importance of interfaith cooperation. While there was some fluctuation over students' four years in college, these commitments largely persisted over time. According to IDEALS, 70% of students were highly committed to bridging religious divides by the end of their fourth collegiate year, affirming that our founding American values continue to endure even within a polarized national landscape.

These findings reflect the inclinations of students as a whole and are very encouraging at first glance. However, when we look more closely at distinct groups, we find that some students were less inclined to engage in bridge building across religious divides. The percent of students highly committed to bridging religious divides was below average for certain demographic groups.

Percent of students who reported “high” **commitment to bridging religious divides** in the following demographic groups:

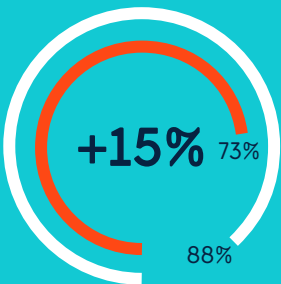


While some of these groups made gains in their commitment to bridging religious divides during college, their underwhelming growth compared to peers deserves special attention. After all, they represent important and sizable communities within the broader American landscape. Therefore, we must ask: how can campus leaders encourage interfaith engagement among students who may not find it as valuable?

Whether a student's commitment to bridge building grows or declines during college may depend on their worldview identity. IDEALS found that certain groups made more pronounced gains than others and some—perhaps those with a higher commitment to bridging religious divides at the outset of college—declined in their commitment over time.

Change in **commitment to bridging religious divides** from college entry to the fourth year of college:

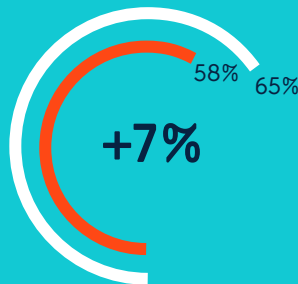
2015 2019



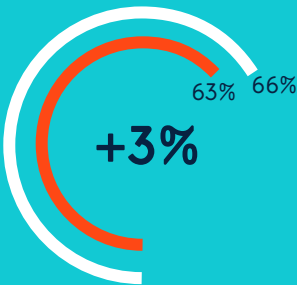
Muslims



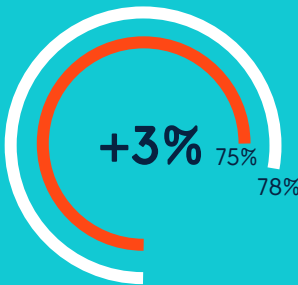
Latter-day Saints



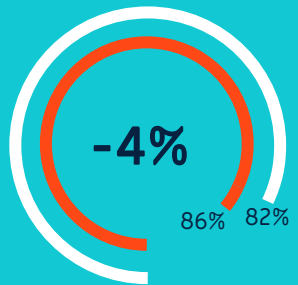
Evangelical Christians



Atheists



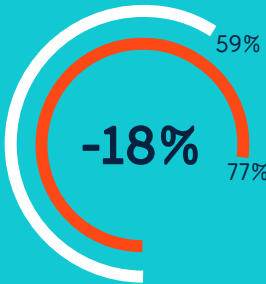
Catholics



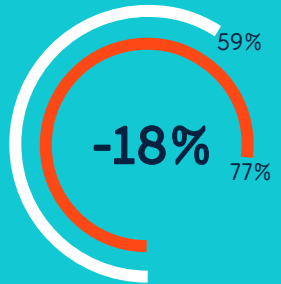
Jews



Mainline Protestants



Buddhists

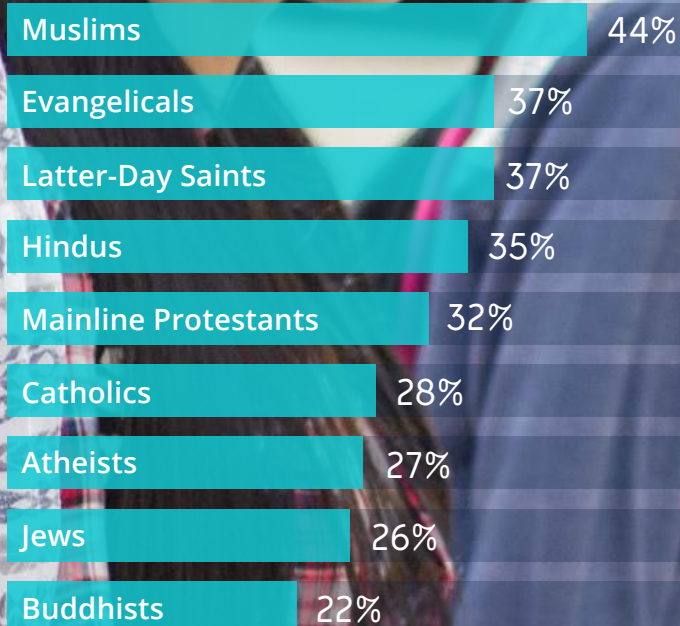


Hindus



While most students see the importance of bridging religious divides, they may lack the skills they need to do so productively. When students were asked if they developed a deeper skill-set to interact with people of diverse beliefs during college, just 32% answered affirmatively.

Percent of students that affirmed they **developed a deeper skill-set to interact with people** of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives in college:





Relatedly, many students reported low levels of involvement in programs and activities that build interfaith skills, and in some cases participation rates declined during the college years. This may be because such opportunities are not widely available in higher education, or perhaps those that do exist are poorly advertised or inaccessible to students. Beyond these practical concerns, we must consider whether students lack interest in opportunities to build interfaith competencies, or if they do not prioritize participation for other reasons.

Percent of students who participated in the following **formal interfaith activities** while in college:

**38%**

of students attended religious services for a religious tradition that is not their own

**14%**

participated in an interfaith dialogue on campus

**11%**

participated in an interfaith action, such as having an impact on critical issues like hunger or poverty

**9%**

participated in interfaith or religious diversity training on campus

**26%**

enrolled in a religion course on campus specifically designed to enhance their knowledge of different religious traditions



Whatever the reason, IDEALS findings illustrate a stark divide between students' espoused values and their actions when it comes to bridging religious divides. Narrowing this gap will require campus leaders to identify and address barriers that keep students from engaging more deeply in interfaith experiences that will prepare them for greater success in their civic and professional lives after graduation.

---

Percent of students who “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the following statements about **people from diverse religious backgrounds**:

96%

I respect people who have religious or nonreligious perspectives that differ from my own.

93%

There are people of other faiths or beliefs whom I admire.

90%

I feel a sense of goodwill toward people of other religious or nonreligious perspectives.

89%

It is important to serve with those of diverse religious backgrounds on issues of common concern.

# Interfaith friendships flourish, but may not prepare students to navigate deep differences.

► Social science research has long emphasized the importance of personal relationships in transforming attitudes and behaviors toward people of different identities.<sup>x</sup> IDEALS findings demonstrate that interfaith friendships in the first year of college can do the same.<sup>xi</sup> They also illustrate how pervasive these friendships are on campus, with 93% of students reporting at least one interfaith friendship by their fourth year of college. Nearly half of all students (49%) reported having five or more friends of other worldviews.

While the numbers are impressive, the fact that students participate in interfaith friendships does not necessarily mean they are having conversations—or perhaps even deep disagreements—about beliefs with peers who hold different worldviews. In fact, 59% of fourth-year college students reported never having had a disagreement with friends about religion, even though it is highly likely those differences exist within interfaith friendships. Promisingly, however, among the 41% who indicated they had disagreed with a friend about religious matters, the vast majority said they remained friends after the disagreement.

Friendships across political divides provide a surprising contrast to interfaith friendships; 71% of students reported disagreeing with friends who did not share their political views (with 65% of students indicating they had a politically motivated disagreement *and* remained friends afterward).

**This begs the question: why do fewer students have disagreements with friends about religion? Is religion a taboo topic? Is it viewed as less relevant than politics, particularly given that a growing number of students are religiously unaffiliated? Or are deeper skills needed to navigate religious differences with sensitivity?**

One IDEALS finding indicates that a lack of confidence may be at play. When students were asked whether they felt confident navigating conversations involving deep disagreement, only 65% agreed. In other words, one-third of fourth-year college students were not convinced of their ability to negotiate challenging conversations with people who held different views—which is noteworthy given the weight that employers place on this essential skill. Another insight from IDEALS suggests that conflict avoidance may also be an issue: 59% of students reported staying quiet at least occasionally during challenging conversations to avoid conflict. While this is certainly disconcerting, it is perhaps equally troubling that 63% of students felt people on their campus interacted primarily within their own religious or worldview communities—and therefore avoided addressing differences altogether.





We do not know definitively why more students are not discussing religious differences with their peers, but we do know that their hesitancy extends beyond the bounds of interfaith friendships. While a large majority of students have positive regard for others even when they deeply disagree with their beliefs (82%), a smaller number actively try to identify common values with people holding different religious perspectives (78%) and even fewer (65%) try to build relationships with people whose beliefs differ from their own.

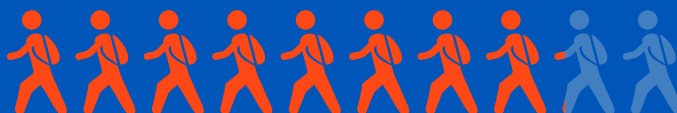
To engage religious diversity productively in the broader society, students must be confident and willing to recognize—rather than avoid—the real and often challenging differences that exist between worldviews. Moreover, they must learn to build bridges across such divides. College campuses serve as an ideal context for students to wrestle with deep differences—with the support of campus leaders who can guide their efforts. However, higher education leaders must be more proactive in creating these opportunities.

Leaving worldview differences unaddressed, or addressing them in only superficial ways, does not prepare students for a world in which people of diverse religious and nonreligious beliefs are increasingly interconnected. It is heartening that so many of today's college students are embracing interfaith friendships, but there is deeper potential within these relationships that needs to be harnessed.

---

Percent of students who “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the following statements about **encountering people with different beliefs**:

82%



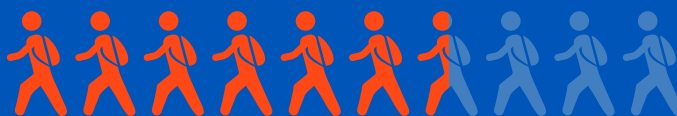
I have a positive regard toward others even when I deeply disagree with their beliefs.

78%



When encountering people with different religious or nonreligious perspectives, I try to identify values we have in common.

65%



I try to build relationships with people who hold religious or nonreligious beliefs that I disagree with.

# Students experience college differently depending on their religious identity—and in some cases feel unwelcome and unsupported.

► The fact that students are struggling to engage religious differences with their friends may be only part of a larger story. Understanding—and improving—their experience of the campus is also an essential factor in building students' capabilities to bridge religious divides. IDEALS research consistently shows that students are more open to participating in activities that engage religious and worldview differences when they feel safe and supported doing so. In other words, an inclusive campus climate is key to igniting exploration of worldview diversity.

Unfortunately, IDEALS also shows that not all students believe their campuses are welcoming of diverse religious perspectives. On-campus incidents of intimidation and antagonism can create an environment that feels hostile rather than welcoming. Alarming, such incidents—most notably those targeting Jewish and Muslim students—have been on the rise in recent years.<sup>xii</sup>



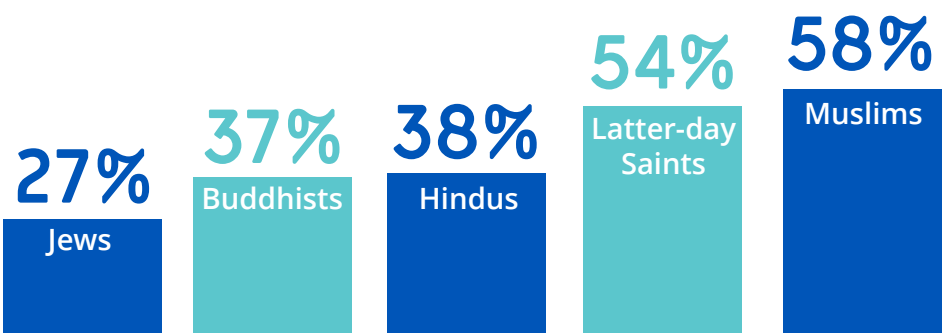
A negative outlook on campus climate is often more acute for religious minority students

According to IDEALS, **Jewish students** are the least likely among their peers to view their campus environments as welcoming to people of diverse faiths. Only 27% of Jewish students in their senior year agreed that their college or university was receptive to religious diversity. Perhaps relatedly, Jewish students were the most likely to observe division and conflict between different worldview groups: 21% of them reported high levels of divisiveness on campus compared to 7% of all other students. Moreover, perceptions of division on campus among Jews increased over the course of their college experience. Jewish students’ experiences of being mistreated or discriminated against because of their religious identity similarly increased over time.

Trends in **Muslim student** perceptions of campus climate are slightly more nuanced and perhaps counterintuitive. Despite well documented discrimination and harassment

against Muslims at colleges and universities, many Muslim students (58%) agreed at least somewhat that their campus was welcoming of diverse religious groups. In fact, this perspective was even more positive than that of nearly all other students, including many members of the Christian majority (who generally tend to view their campuses as more welcoming). Simultaneously, IDEALS confirms that Muslim students continue to have negative experiences on campus. For example, Muslims reported hearing or reading insensitive comments about their religion on campus at higher rates than their peers. While less than 1% of students overall regularly encountered insensitive messages about their religious or nonreligious identity, 7% of Muslim students reported such encounters on a frequent basis. Nearly one-fifth of Muslims also reported they often felt pressured to limit when or how they express their worldview, setting them apart from most of their peers.

Percent of religious minority students who “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their campus is welcoming of religious diversity:



Other religious minority groups reported disparate experiences of the campus climate. Members of **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**, for example, experienced a welcoming climate at rates almost as high as Muslim students. Meanwhile, only 37% of **Buddhist students** and 38% of **Hindu students** felt the same way about campus welcome. This may be unsurprising given that one-third of Hindus regularly perceived their peers making insensitive comments about Hinduism while in college, and 36% of Hindus reported frequently feeling pressured to limit expression of their worldview in some fashion.

When we broaden our scope to look at campus climate through the eyes of **nonreligious students** and **students in the Christian majority**, it is notable that atheists and other nonreligious students expressed more tepid perceptions of campus welcome despite comprising an increasingly accepted worldview group within higher education.<sup>xiii</sup> Meanwhile, half of all Christian students did not believe their campuses were receptive to religious diversity overall. Perhaps surprisingly, **evangelical** (23%) and **Catholic** (22%) students felt pressured to limit expression of their religious beliefs almost as often as their Jewish and Muslim peers did. Twenty-six percent of **evangelicals** also reported feeling compelled to separate their religious beliefs from their academic experience, higher than every other group except Hindus (36%).



An aerial photograph of a university campus. The image shows several large, multi-story red brick buildings with white roofs. There are green lawns, trees, and paved walkways. The architecture is a mix of traditional and modern styles. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

## Students report disparities in support for different worldviews on campus

IDEALS shows that an important way to improve perceptions of the campus climate involves providing space and support for individual worldview expression; in turn, these positive experiences create the conditions for learning how to bridge religious and worldview divides. When students believe places exist on campus where they can express their beliefs, and when they feel safe doing so, it suggests their religious identity is recognized and valued. Relatedly, when faculty and staff make accommodations for students to celebrate religious holidays or other important observances, students perceive support for their personal worldview.



Percent of students who reported  
"high" levels of **space for support and  
worldview expression** on campus:

71%

Latter-day  
Saints

69%

Jews

56%

Evangelical  
Christians

62%

Muslims

44%

Buddhists

63%

Atheists

56%

Mainline  
Protestants

61%

Catholics

35%

Hindus



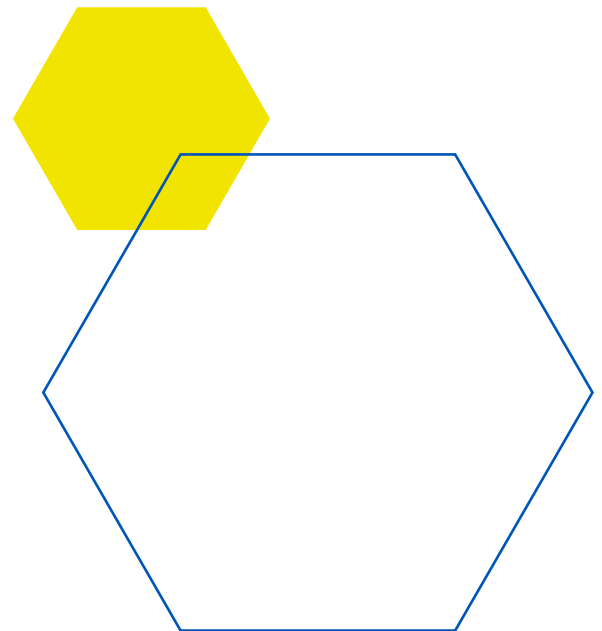
IDEALS brought to light many promising signs that students feel supported in expressing their personal worldview on campus. For example:

**Atheists** reported high levels of campus support, surpassing average peer responses when asked about feeling safe expressing worldview beliefs on campus (84%) and in class (77%).

77% of **Muslims** and 75% of **Latter-day Saints** indicated their religious holidays were accommodated by faculty and staff.

**Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals** reported very high levels of campus support for their religious identities. However, they diverged slightly when it came to expressing their religious beliefs in class: 71% of Catholics felt safe doing so, while just under two-thirds of mainline Protestants (64%) and evangelicals (65%) felt the same.

Overwhelmingly, students agreed there was a place on campus where they could express their worldview; groups that reported the highest levels of agreement were **mainline Protestants** (83%), **evangelicals** (83%), **Jews** (84%), **Catholics** (85%), and **Latter-day Saints** (89%).



At the same time, IDEALS revealed that not all students experience the same levels of support for their worldviews. Buddhists, Hindus, and students of other minority religions (e.g., Daoism, Jainism, Native American Traditions) consistently responded less favorably than their peers when asked if their campus offered space and support for religious expression:

**Buddhists** indicated the lowest levels of agreement among all their peers when asked whether they felt safe expressing their beliefs on campus (67%) or in class (53%).

Less than half of **Hindus** (47%) and students of **other minority religions** (45%) agreed when asked if faculty and staff offered them religious accommodations.

Nearly one-fifth of students from **other minority religions** beyond Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism did not feel there was a place on campus where they could express their worldview (compared to only 6% of all students who felt the same way).

Cumulatively, the findings presented here indicate there is much work to be done if colleges and universities intend to support students of all religious identities, especially those identifying as a religious minority. It appears that some students are being set up for success better than others when it comes to building skills for interfaith cooperation.

Improving the campus climate for people of all faiths is essential for students to feel comfortable sharing their beliefs and navigating religious differences. These experiences will equip them to approach similarly challenging situations effectively when they move beyond college and into new civic and professional spheres—a skill-set that is sorely needed in today's world.

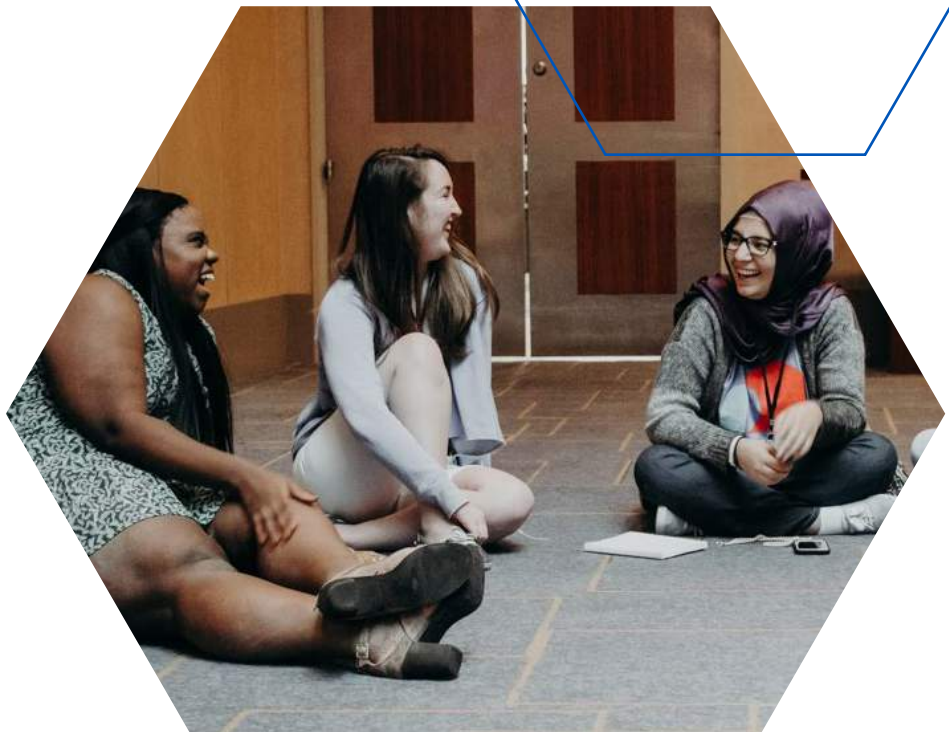


# Most students are not gaining the necessary knowledge to navigate a religiously diverse country.

► College offers students a unique opportunity to learn about and engage with diverse people and ideas both in and out of the classroom. Higher education has long emphasized the importance of diversity education, creating opportunities where students learn about a wide variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. The fruits of this educational emphasis are evident in the IDEALS data: by the end of their fourth year, the majority of college students reported learning about a variety of social identities while on campus.

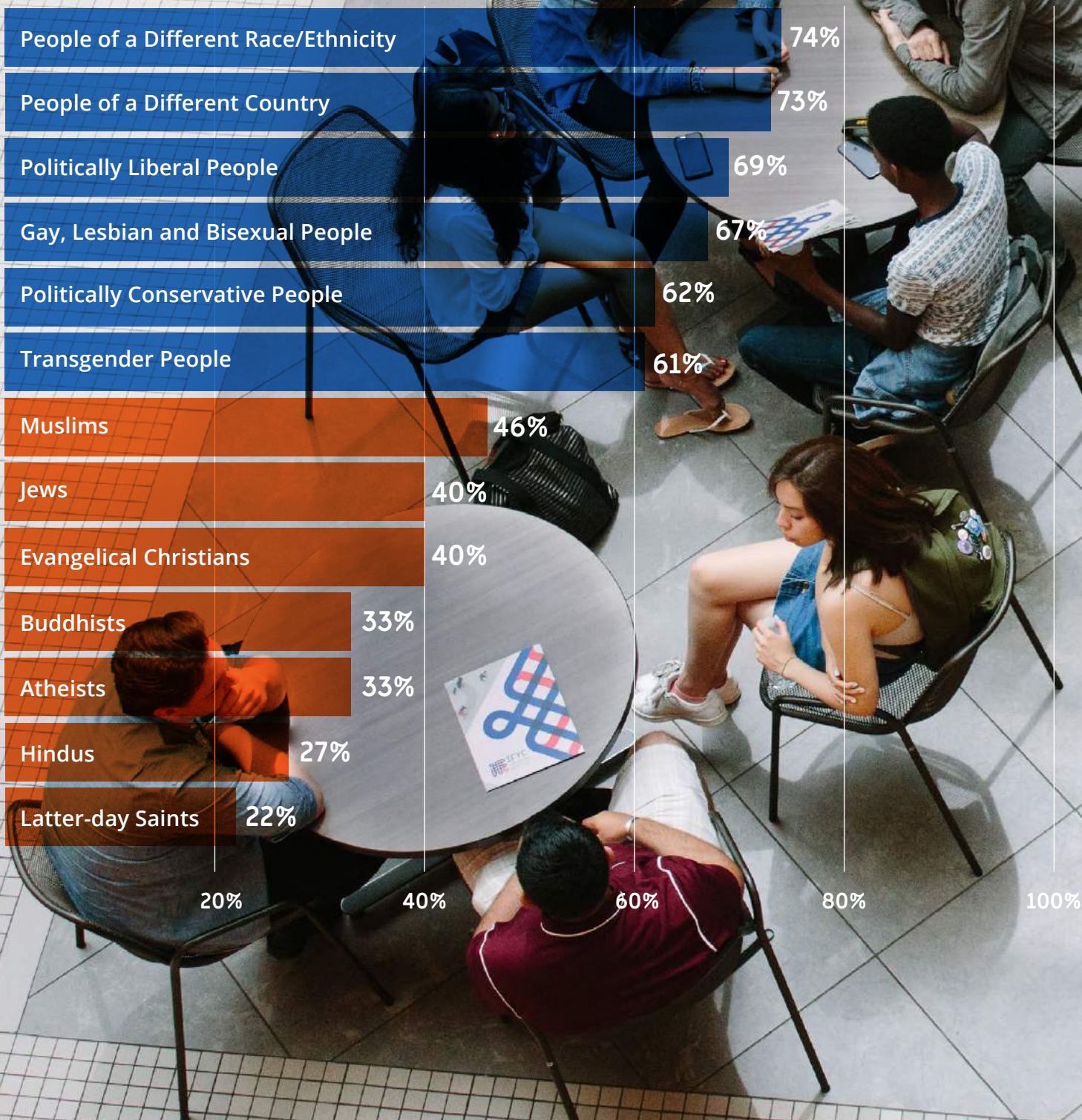
It is a testament to higher education leaders that so many students reported learning about a variety of social identities represented in America's diverse democracy. At the same time, IDEALS reinforces what prior higher education research has already shown: the college experience does not equally prioritize learning about diverse religions and worldviews compared to learning about other identities.<sup>xiv</sup> Less than half of fourth-year students agreed that they dedicated time to learn about specific worldview identities while in college. In a nation with a rapidly diversifying religious makeup, this raises worrying questions about whether students are adequately preparing for the world that awaits them after college. Are they learning enough about religious diversity in college? Perhaps not, according to IDEALS findings.

While measuring religious literacy is inherently challenging, doing so is valuable. For example, research suggests that knowledge of other worldview groups is linked to positive attitudes toward those groups.<sup>xv</sup> IDEALS gauges religious literacy using a short quiz that poses factual questions about eight different worldviews: Atheism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Christianity, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Importantly, the quiz focuses on positive aspects of these traditions—knowledge that might foster favorable perceptions of a given worldview. This quiz evaluated students' knowledge using a letter grade system. The insights it provides should be interpreted with caution given the length of the quiz; nevertheless, the findings shed light on students' foundational knowledge of diverse religious traditions.





Percent of students who “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they **dedicated time to learn about** the following groups while in college:

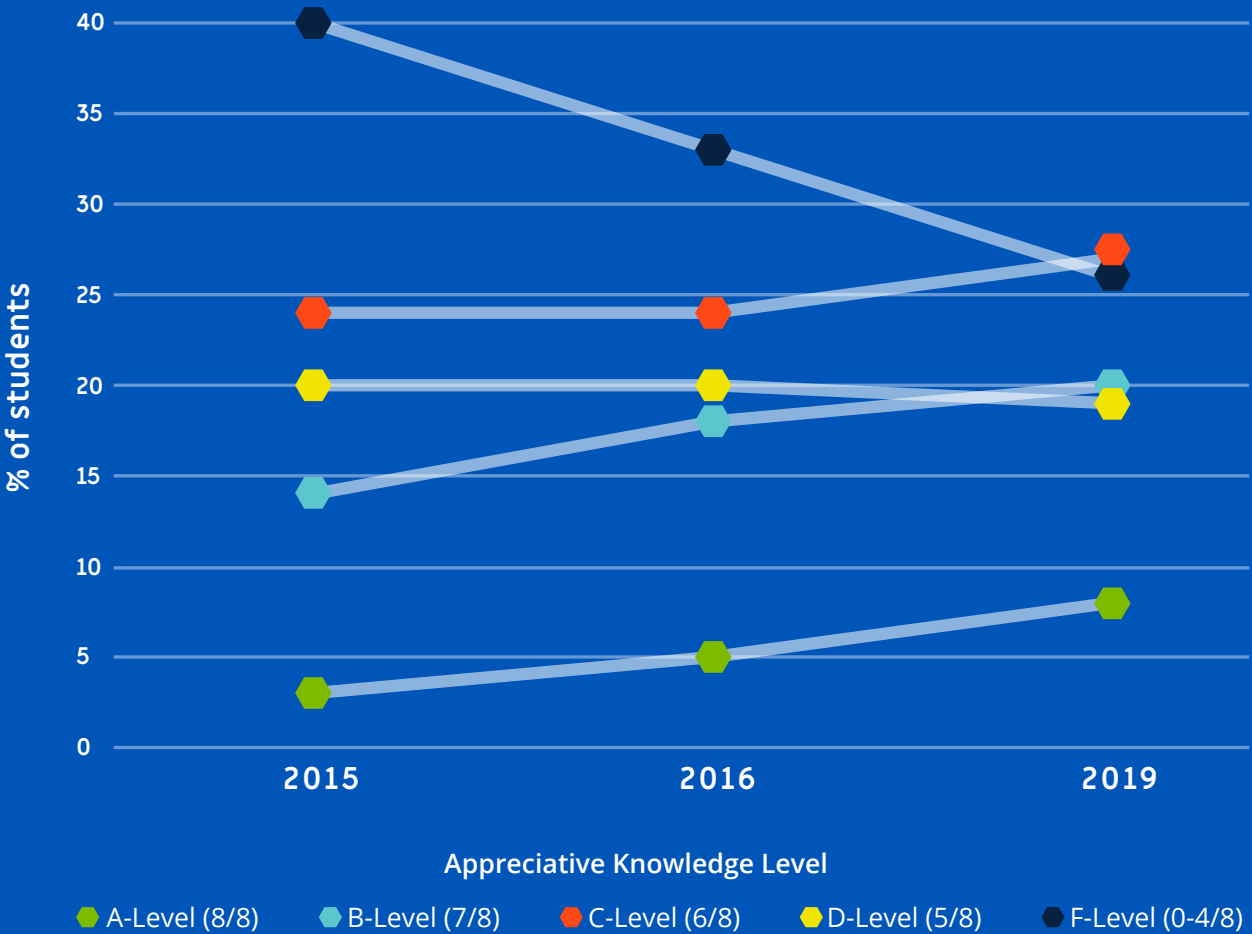




Throughout college, most students received “C” grades or below on the IDEALS religious literacy quiz. While students’ accuracy improved as their collegiate careers progressed, nearly three-quarters of students in their fourth year achieved a “C” grade or below. A full quarter of fourth-year students received a failing grade. These findings contribute to a large body of literature that documents the need for greater religious literacy among the American public.<sup>xvi</sup>

IDEALS tells us that, despite making gains across the college years, students have much room to grow in their religious literacy. Correspondingly, there may be an opportunity to improve their attitudes toward people with diverse religious identities. Students’ knowledge and appreciation of religious differences will prepare them to collaborate and problem-solve in diverse communities after graduation—both of which are highly sought-after skills in today’s workforce.

Change in **religious literacy scores** from college entry to the fourth year of college:



# After promising growth in the first year, student attitudes toward political conservatives steadily decline.

► Robert Putnam and David Campbell's *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* highlights a phenomenon that the authors call the "God gap"—that is, the fact that an individual's religiosity often predicts their voting patterns. While the "God gap" has become an even stronger reality in these starkly polarized times, less is known about how someone's religious identity influences their attitudes toward people of diverse political perspectives. Given the ongoing struggle to find common ground across today's political landscape, we should examine whether one's religious identity plays a role in bridging or solidifying ideological divides.

In addition to focusing on college student experiences with religious diversity, IDEALS asked questions about students' attitudes toward a variety of identity groups—including political liberals and conservatives. The study revealed that student attitudes toward most identities became more positive during the first year of college. Over the course of all four years, however, positive attitudes toward certain identities tended to level off or even decline.

With some exceptions, positive attitudes toward politically liberal people generally increased during college: 58% of students reported "high" positive attitudes toward this group in 2015, a number that increased substantially to 66% in 2016 and more modestly to 70% in 2019. Some worldview groups demonstrated nuanced patterns of growth, but in general students expressed more positive attitudes toward political liberals at the end of college than when they first arrived on campus.

Encouragingly, students identifying with religions that tend to be more politically conservative (such as evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints)<sup>xvii</sup> made meaningful gains in their positive attitudes toward political liberals during college.

Patterns in the data are very different when examining student attitudes toward political conservatives. Indeed, these findings buck the larger trends when it comes to attitudes toward most other social identity groups. On average, students had less favorable attitudes toward political conservatives than liberals when they began college. Their positive attitudes toward conservatives increased only during the first year, and then declined back to pre-college levels thereafter.

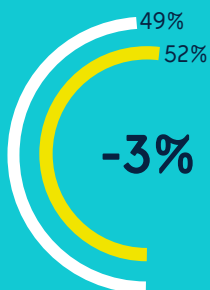
**Attitudes toward political conservatives declined more starkly during college than attitudes toward any other identity group, which is particularly surprising considering promising growth in the first year.**



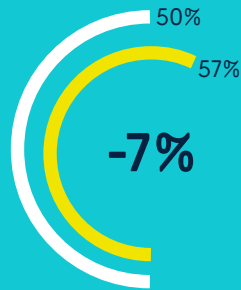
IDEALS data illuminate other unexpected dynamics between religion and politics when student attitudes are broken down by worldview.

Change in **positive attitudes toward political conservatives** after the first year of college:

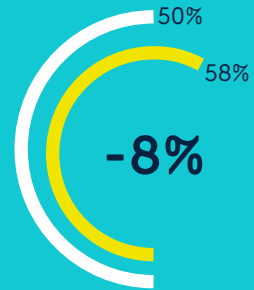
2016 2019



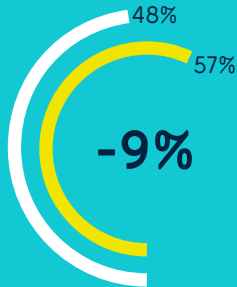
Muslims



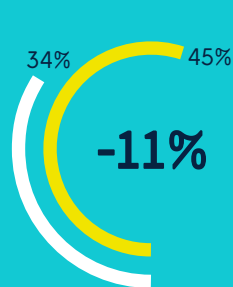
Mainline Protestants



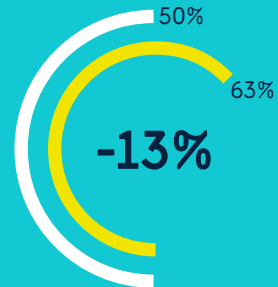
Evangelical Christians



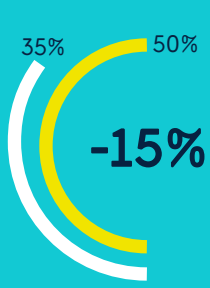
Atheists



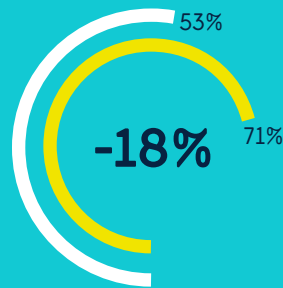
Catholics



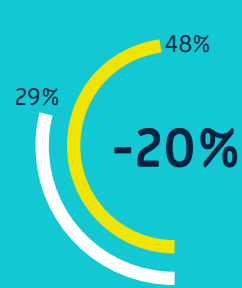
Jews



Buddhists



Latter-day Saints



Hindus



Some groups with the highest regard for political conservatives at the end of their first year showed the sharpest declines between 2016 and 2019 (e.g., Hindus, Latter-day Saints).

Members of religious communities that often have strong ties to the national Republican party, such as evangelical Christian groups and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, appreciated political conservatives less at the end of college than they did in their first year.

Muslim students demonstrated the greatest consistency in positive attitudes toward political conservatives from 2016 to 2019, with a much more gradual decline compared to other groups. This is somewhat surprising given the policies of the presidential administration (including the so-called “Muslim ban”) during this period.

Unlike other groups, Jewish students did not experience growth in positive attitudes toward political conservatives. Rather, their attitudes remained the same throughout their first year and declined markedly after that.

Atheists’ attitudes toward political conservatives grew considerably in the first year of college. However, they lost nearly all that ground by the end of their fourth year.

It is important to recognize that IDEALS was conducted during an especially volatile political period when a highly polarizing presidential administration took office. The national climate undoubtedly shaped students’ attitudes about different political ideologies, but this tumultuous period also illuminates the vital importance of encouraging students to see value in diverse political perspectives.

**IDEALS findings raise important questions about how well higher education is positioned to address deepening political divides, particularly when it comes to working productively with politically conservative communities.**



## Recommendations

- The future of a nation with a richly diverse religious landscape is filled with promise—and challenge. Realizing our potential and moving beyond the deep divisions facing our nation today will require everyone to learn ways of navigating this landscape more effectively. Higher education is uniquely positioned to prepare an entire generation of emerging adults—our future leaders—to embrace interfaith cooperation as a social norm. Promisingly, IDEALS suggests that today's college students are poised for success in this arena: they exhibit high levels of respect and goodwill toward people who hold diverse religious perspectives and are overwhelmingly likely to have at least one friend with a worldview different from their own.

However, to fully leverage the potential of today's college goers as interfaith leaders, higher education must do more. Five years of rigorous IDEALS research bring to light invaluable insights about the interfaith experiences and perceptions of college students, and study findings highlight where institutional efforts should be focused. IDEALS also reveals effective ways to prepare graduates for success in the workplaces and communities that await them after graduation. Taken together, these practices help chart a path for higher education leaders committed to cultivating a generation of bridge builders.

## Institutional Investment

For college and university leaders at the highest levels (e.g., presidents, vice-presidents, and provosts) who are prepared to invest broadly in developing students' interfaith competencies, the following changes should be considered:

### **Send the message that your institution values all religious and worldview identities.**

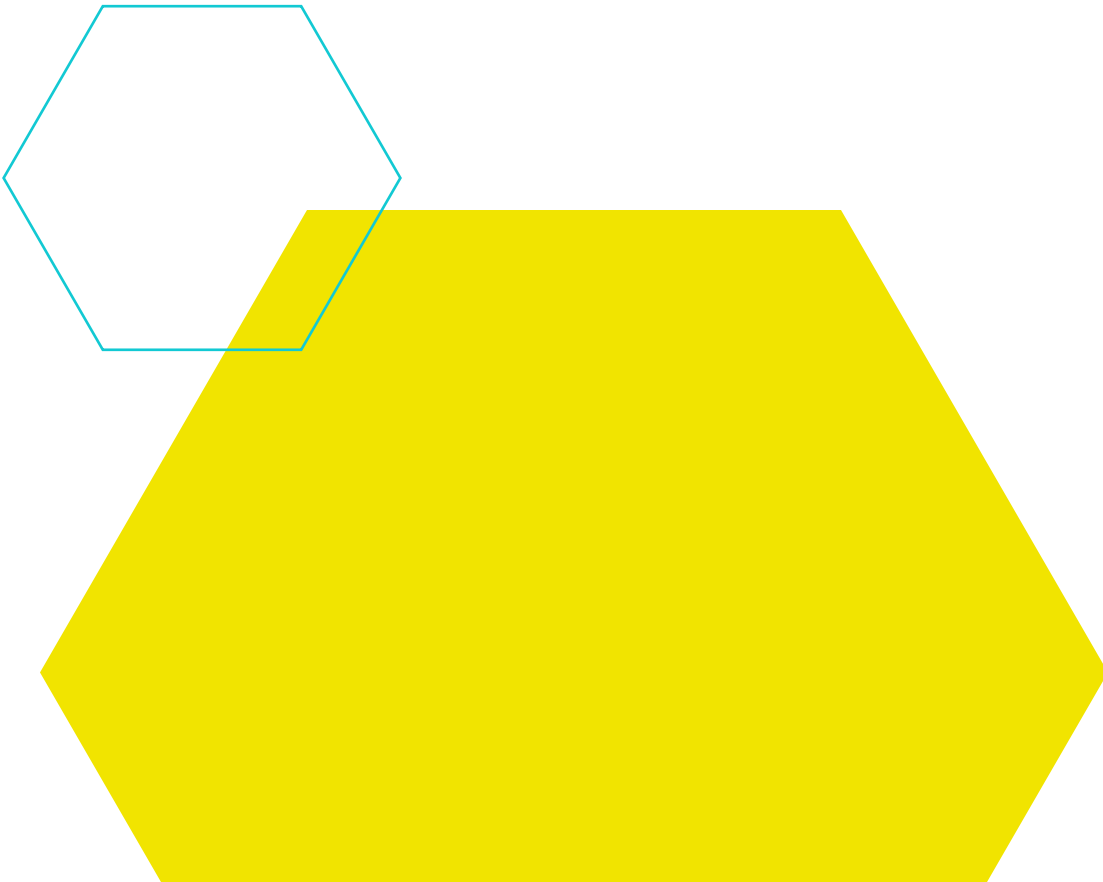
Whether you dedicate space on campus where all students can express their worldviews, endorse the formation of religiously-focused student organizations, or hire staff who are responsible for supporting diverse religious groups, you send a message that religious diversity is valued. Students who experience personal acceptance on campus are more likely to make gains in their interfaith learning and development.

### **Focus on teaching positive regard for all.**

At institutions where the student body collectively shows positive attitudes toward people with diverse beliefs, student attitudes toward specific religious minority groups are also more favorable. In other words, when it comes to cultivating appreciation for religious differences, a rising tide lifts all boats. For higher education leaders, this means that espousing inclusion for all can improve the campus experience for specific groups of students who struggle to feel welcomed and supported.

### **Expand religious, spiritual, or interfaith diversity policies.**

Creating policies that promote inclusion of different worldviews—such as formal accommodations in the academic sphere, offering food options that meet particular religious dietary needs in the dining halls, and explicitly naming religion in campus diversity statements—is a powerful way to affirm your institution's commitment to religious diversity. The mere presence of such policies is linked to students' interfaith learning and development, underscoring the capacity of institutional measures to tangibly affect students across campus.





### Make interfaith experiences mandatory for all students.

Students are more likely to develop interfaith competencies when they have **at least one curricular experience** focused on religious diversity while in college. Participating in **at least two structured interfaith activities outside the classroom** is also impactful, especially when those activities occur in the first collegiate year. For campus leaders who are serious about cultivating interfaith learning and development, requiring student participation in activities that expose them to different worldview perspectives deserves weighty consideration.

### Expand interfaith programming.

On campuses that provide more religious, spiritual, and interfaith programs, students demonstrate greater interfaith learning and development. Simply offering such programs influences student growth, regardless of student participation rates. Therefore, investing in a diverse array of interfaith initiatives may serve as an ideal starting point for campus leaders dedicated to helping students gain appreciation for worldview differences and learn how to bridge religious divides.

#### Structured interfaith experiences outside of class may include...

- Participating in interfaith or religious diversity training
- Participating in an interfaith dialogue
- Participating in interfaith action that has an impact on critical issues like hunger or poverty
- Learning about religious diversity on campus in orientation or other required events
- Working together with students of other religious or nonreligious perspectives on a service project

#### Curricular experiences may include...

- Discussing religious or spiritual topics with faculty
- Discussing religious diversity in a general education course
- Using a case study to examine religious and nonreligious diversity
- Taking a religion course designed to enhance knowledge of different religious traditions

## Educational Interventions

Educators across campus who work directly with students also have the power to create moments of transformative learning through campus programming. Effective programs ought to do the following:

### **Challenge assumptions and prompt perspective-taking.**

Opportunities for students to rethink assumptions about different worldviews (including their own) and consider how others see the world are often powerful moments of learning and development. These provocative encounters can take shape in myriad ways both inside and outside the classroom. Though they might feel risky, the benefits of provocative encounters are substantial, and educators should not shy away from them.

### **Create occasions for interfaith friendships to flourish.**

Friendships between students with different worldviews, especially those formed during the first year of college, have tremendous power to build students' interfaith capacity. While it is not possible to foster authentic friendships directly, educators can create the conditions for such relationships to evolve. Wherever students interact in sustained and meaningful ways—in leadership trainings, class projects, or study abroad cohorts, to name a few examples—educators can incorporate activities that encourage interfaith engagement and offer support in navigating religious differences effectively.

### **Provide opportunities for informal interaction between religiously diverse students.**

Social activities provide some of the best occasions for students of diverse perspectives to come together. Dining, studying, or socializing with people who hold different beliefs, even if those beliefs are not explicitly discussed, impacts student learning and development. Residence hall social events, study groups, and activities that bring students together to share a meal are all examples of programs that educators can utilize with the aim of interfaith engagement in mind.

### **Appeal to students whose interfaith competencies warrant special attention.**

By the final year of college, certain groups of students—including atheists, evangelical Christians, political conservatives, STEM majors, and men—appear less inclined to value bridge building across religious divides. Members of these groups are often influential on campus and in society; therefore, it is critical to give special attention to their learning and development while in college. Educators should be proactive in developing programs that are relevant, accessible, and culturally appropriate for these groups to maximize their participation.



#### **Provocative encounters include experiences where students...**

- Examine their biases toward different religions or worldviews
- Deepen their knowledge about their own worldview
- Engage people in conversation with whom they disagree



IDEALS gives us tremendous insight into the collegiate experience of religious diversity in the United States, and points to data-driven practices for enhancing students' interfaith learning and development. The recommendations offered here are not prescriptive; rather, they provide concrete examples to inspire action on college and university campuses.

As Covid-19 ushers in unprecedented changes for higher education, it will be critical for higher education leaders and practitioners to creatively imagine additional ways to translate IDEALS findings into practice.

Whatever paths are taken to improve the scope and impact of interfaith engagement on campus, the overarching objective remains clear—today's college graduates must be adequately prepared for the diverse world that awaits them.

Doing so requires stakeholders in higher education to make changes—and we must all hold them accountable for cultivating the leaders we need for our nation's future.



# Citations

- <sup>i</sup> Smith, James P., and Barry Edmonston. "The Face of the U.S. Population in 2050." In *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997.
- <sup>ii</sup> Craig, Maureen A., Julian M. Rucker, and Jennifer A. Richeson. "Racial and Political Dynamics of an Approaching 'Majority-Minority' United States". *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677, no. 1 (2018): 204–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218766269>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Packer, George. "We Are Living in a Failed State." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, May 1, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/underlying-conditions/610261>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Cox, Daniel, and Robert P. Jones. "America's Changing Religious Identity." Research. *Public Religion Research Institute*, September 6, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.
- <sup>v</sup> Cooperman, Alan, and Gregory A. Smith. "The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious 'Nones' in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, September 14, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Hawkins, Stephen, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres, and Tim Dixon. *The Hidden Tribes of America*. New York: More in Common, 2018. [https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden\\_tribes\\_report.pdf](https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf).
- <sup>vii</sup> "Antisemitic Incidents Hit All-Time High in 2019." Anti-Defamation League. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/antisemitic-incidents-hit-all-time-high-in-2019>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Igoe, Molly. "Corporate America Leads in Exposing Americans to Diversity." *Public Religion Research Institute*, July 29, 2019. <https://www.prrri.org/spotlight/corporate-america-leads-in-exposing-americans-to-diversity/>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Association of American Colleges & Universities. *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success*. Washington, DC: Hart Research Associates, 2015. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-falling-short>.
- <sup>x</sup> Putnam, Robert D. "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 137–74. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x>.
- <sup>xi</sup> Rockenbach, Alyssa N., Tara D. Hudson, Matthew J. Mayhew, Benjamin P. Correia-Harker, Shauna Morin, and Associates. *Friendships Matter: The Role of Peer Relationships in Interfaith Learning and Development*. Chicago: Interfaith Youth Core, 2019.
- <sup>xii</sup> Farber, Barry A., and Arielle Poleg. "Campus Diversity, Jewishness, and Antisemitism." *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 75, no. 11 (November 2019): 2034–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22862>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Bowman, Nicholas A., Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Matthew J. Mayhew, Tiffani A. Riggers-Piehl, and Tara D. Hudson. "College Students' Appreciative Attitudes Toward Atheists." *Research in Higher Education* 58, no. 1 (April 13, 2016): 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9417-z>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Rockenbach, Alyssa Bryant, and Matthew J. Mayhew. "The Campus Spiritual Climate: Predictors of Satisfaction Among Students With Diverse Worldviews." *Journal of College Student Development* 55, no. 1 (January 2014): 41–62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0002>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Patel, Eboo. *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Marcus, Benjamin P. "Religious Literacy in American Education." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Education*, 56–72. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Moore, Diane L. *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Steensland, Brian, and Eric L. Wright. "American Evangelicals and Conservative Politics: Past, Present, and Future." *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 5 (2014): 705–17. <http://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12175>.

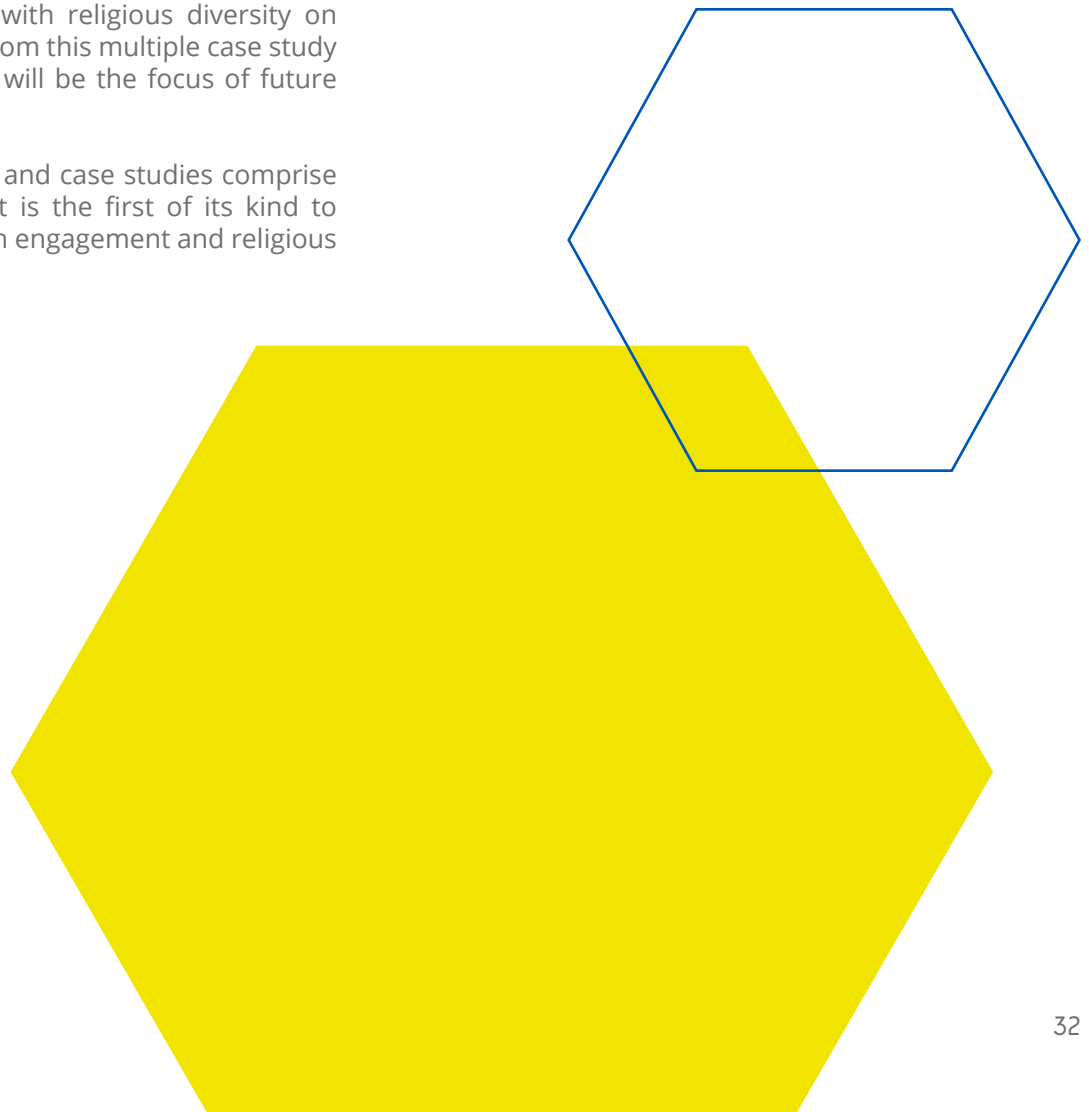


# About the Research

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) was designed to examine student perspectives of, and engagement with, religious diversity in college. The survey was administered at three time points to a national cohort of students who entered college in 2015—at the outset of college, after their first collegiate year, and near the end of their fourth year in college. Students from 122 institutions participated in IDEALS; the colleges and universities represented were large and small, public and private, religiously affiliated and nonsectarian. 3,486 students from 116 institutions supplied usable responses to IDEALS at all three time points. Their survey responses inform the findings provided in this report.

After the second wave of IDEALS, eighteen participating campuses were identified as qualitative case study sites where survey findings could be explored more deeply. 268 students and 223 faculty, staff, and administrators participated in interviews and focus groups where they shared perceptions of the college environment and the nature of their encounters with religious diversity on campus. Emergent themes from this multiple case study are not included herein but will be the focus of future IDEALS work.

Together, the IDEALS survey and case studies comprise a mixed-methods study that is the first of its kind to focus specifically on interfaith engagement and religious diversity in college.



# Institutional Characteristics

The findings in this report reflect survey responses from students at 116 colleges and universities across the U.S.

## Institutional Affiliation

32

Public  
Campuses

30

Private  
Nonsectarian  
Campuses

29

Mainline  
Protestant  
Campuses

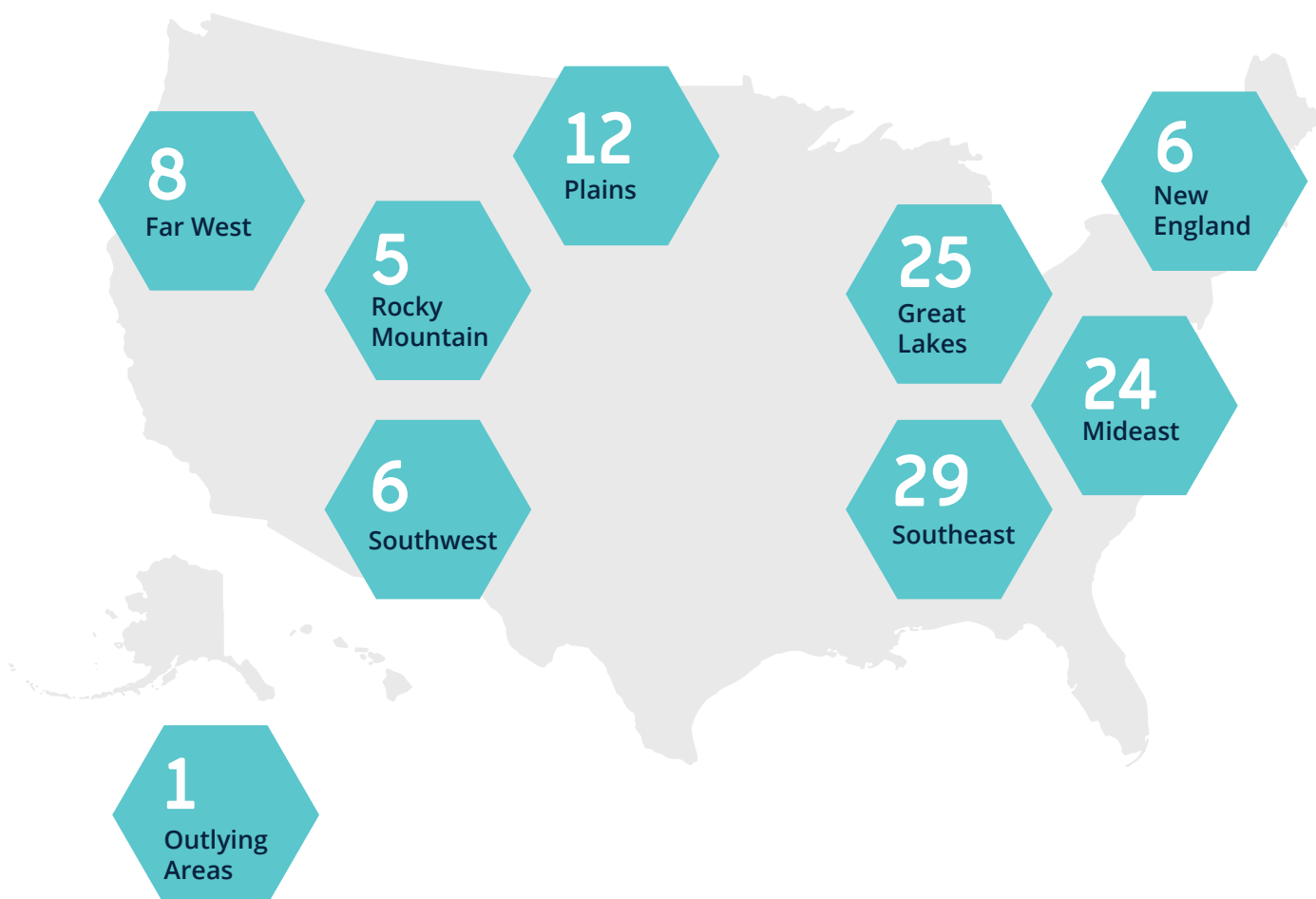
14

Roman  
Catholic  
Campuses

11

Evangelical  
Christian  
Campuses

## Geographic Region

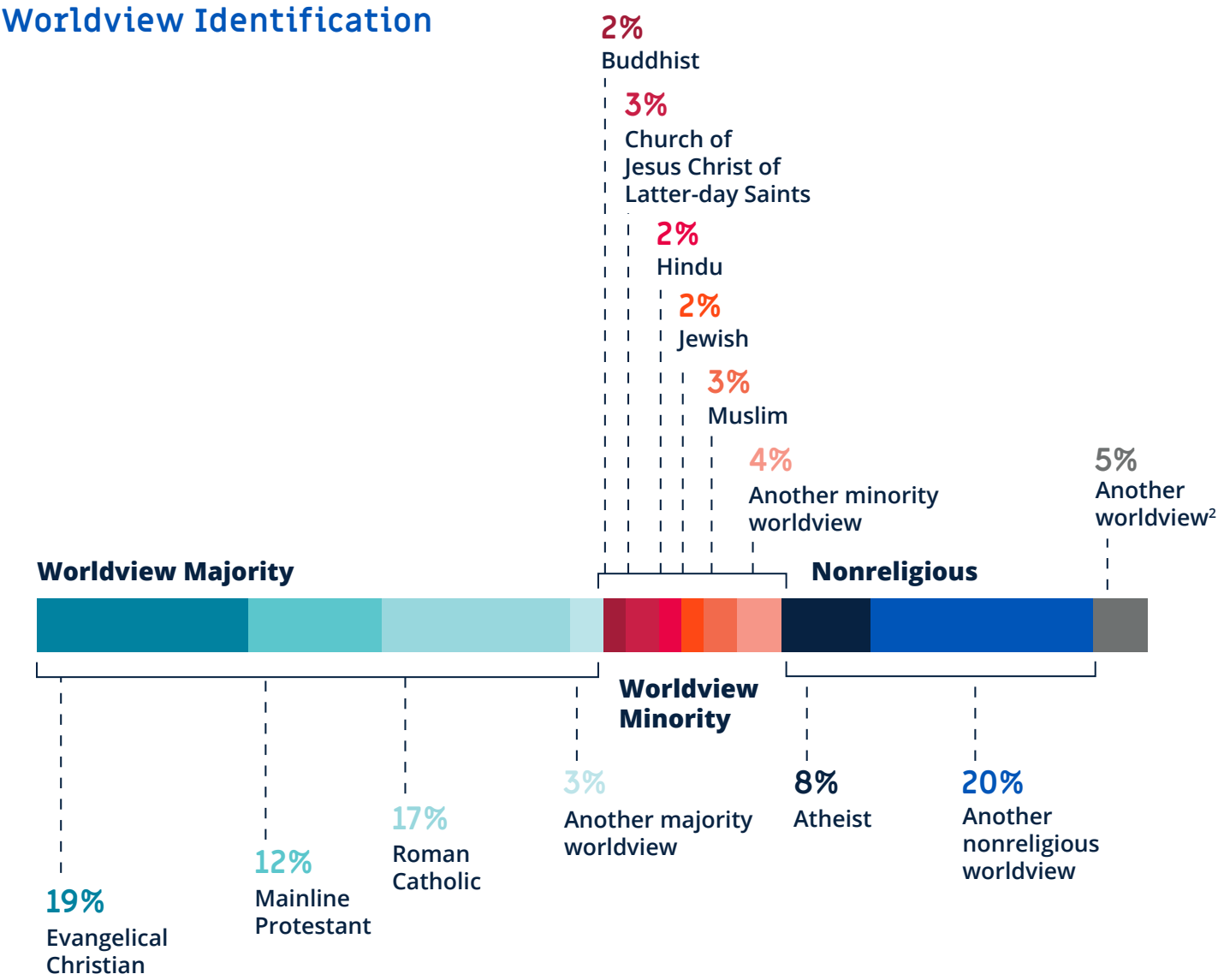




# Respondent Characteristics

IDEALS data were weighted to represent the national population of college students. The following information reflects demographic trends for a national cohort of students in college from 2015-2019.<sup>1</sup>

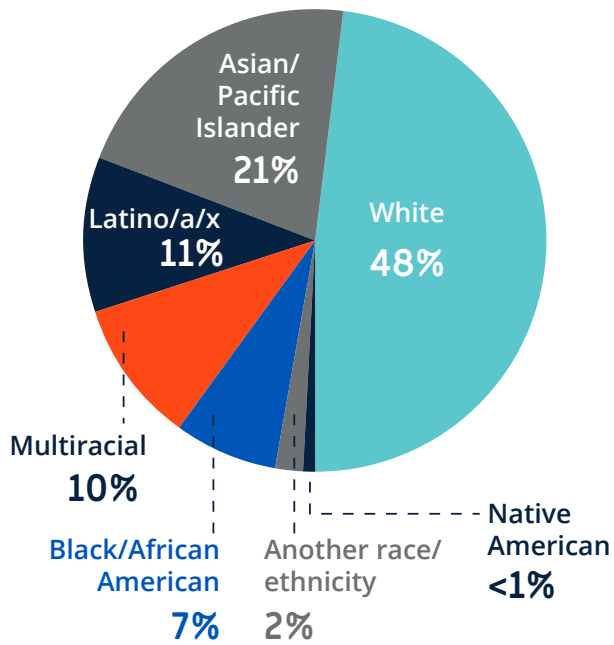
## Worldview Identification



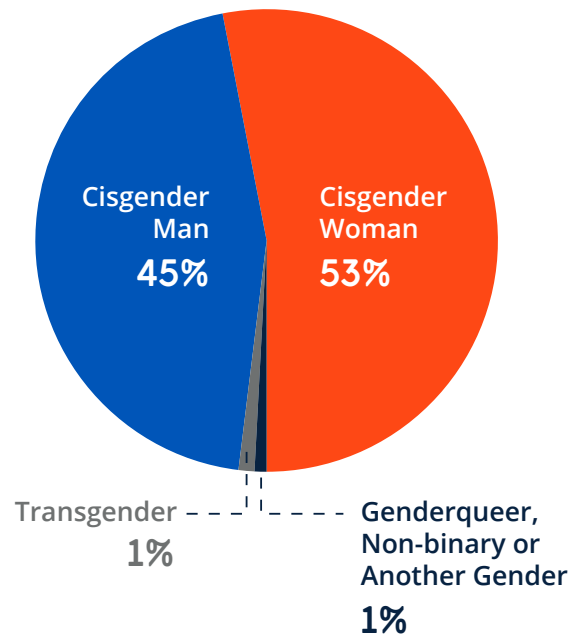
<sup>1</sup> Percentages for demographic categories have been rounded and may not total 100%

<sup>2</sup> The "another worldview" categories in this section represent worldview identifications that do not fall into any of the other categories listed.

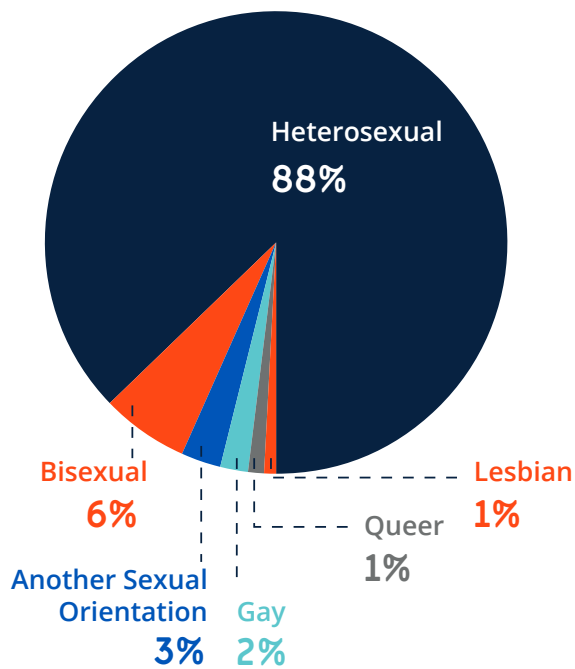
## Race/Ethnicity



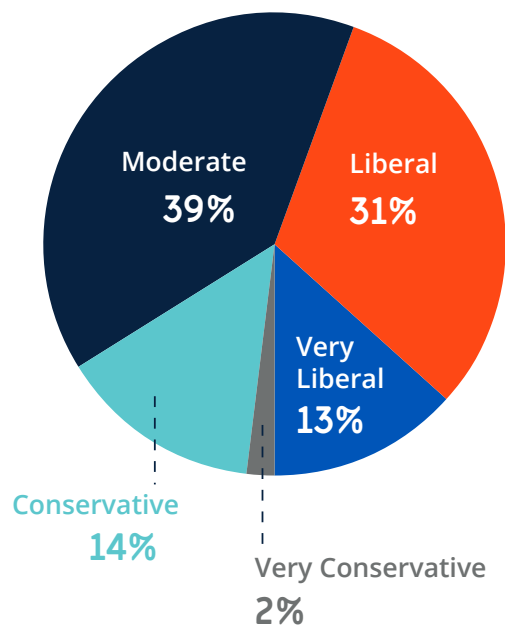
## Gender



## Sexual Orientation



## Political Leaning



# About the Survey Creators

## **Matthew J. Mayhew, Co-Principal Investigator & The William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration**

Matthew Mayhew is the William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher professor of educational administration with a focus on higher education and student affairs at The Ohio State University. He is interested in how collegiate conditions, educational practices, and student experiences influence learning and democratic outcomes. He has received over 17 million dollars in grants for exploring the impact of college on student outcomes, including, but not limited to, moral reasoning, spirituality, high-risk drinking, and innovative entrepreneurship. Dr. Mayhew has published over 80 articles, is lead author on the most recent volume of *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that College Works*, and has contributed to a variety of media outlets, such as *The Huffington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Conversation*, and *BusinessInsider*. In addition to serving as co-principal investigator of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), he directs the College Impact Laboratory where he oversees the Assessment of Co-Curricular Residential Experiences and Outcomes (ACREO) survey. ACREO is designed to measure the associations between residential environments and student achievement of timely and relevant outcomes, such as intention to innovate, bystander intervention, and financial health and wellness. Dr. Mayhew earned his doctorate in higher education administration with a focus on research, evaluation, and assessment from the University of Michigan in 2004.

## **Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Co-Principal Investigator & Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development**

Alyssa Rockenbach is professor of higher education in the department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University. Her interdisciplinary research centers on the effects of college environments and experiences on student learning; religious and worldview diversity issues in higher education; intergroup dynamics, cooperation, and attitudes; young adult psychosocial development; and gender and LGBTQ equity issues in education and society. She is co-principal investigator of a five-year national study, the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), which explores how educational experiences affect college students' capacity to engage and cooperate with people of diverse worldviews. Dr. Rockenbach has authored or co-authored more than 100 publications, including peer-reviewed articles, books and book chapters, reports and monographs, and other scholarly works. She is co-author of the 2016 book, *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works*, a synthesis of over 1,800 research studies of college impact conducted from 2002 to 2013, and she co-edited the 2012 volume, *Spirituality in College Students' Lives: Translating Research Into Practice*. Her work has been featured in media outlets such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Conversation*. She was named Alumni Distinguished Graduate Professor and University Faculty Scholar at North Carolina State University, and received the Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association. Dr. Rockenbach received her B.A. in psychology from California State University, Long Beach and her M.A. and Ph.D. in education from the University of California, Los Angeles.



# About Interfaith Youth Core

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) is a national non-profit organization working toward an America where people of different faiths, worldviews, and traditions can bridge differences and find common values to build a shared life together. IFYC works in higher education, partnering with U.S. colleges and universities to make interfaith cooperation a vital part of the college experience and ultimately a positive force in our society. IFYC convenes trainings and gatherings, facilitates campus visits, and offers free tools and resources to support interfaith engagement on campuses across the nation.



# The IDEALS Team

## *Interfaith Youth Core*

Mary Ellen Giess, Senior Director of Strategic Partnerships  
Janett I. Cordovés, Director of Higher Education Partnerships  
Shauna Morin, Research Fellow

## *North Carolina State University*

Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Co-Principal Investigator & Professor,  
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development  
Lori E. Durako Fisher, Research Associate  
Gordon W. Maples, Research Associate  
Kevin C. Singer, Research Associate  
Mian (Helen) Wu, Research Associate

## *The Ohio State University*

Matthew J. Mayhew, Co-Principal Investigator & The William Ray and  
Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration  
B. Ashley Staples, Postdoctoral Research Fellow  
Christa E. Winkler, Postdoctoral Research Fellow

# Advisory Board

Nicholas A. Bowman, Professor and Director of the Center for Research on  
Undergraduate Education, The University of Iowa

Nida Denson, Senior Research Fellow and ARC Postdoctoral Fellow, University  
of Western Sydney

Douglas (Jake) Jacobsen, Emeritus Professor of Church History and Theology,  
Messiah College

Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, Professor of Psychology and Director of Faculty  
Development, Messiah College

Caryn McTighe Musil, AAC&U Distinguished Fellow, Former Senior Vice President  
of the Association of American Colleges and Universities

Shabana Mir, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of  
Undergraduate Studies, American Islamic College

Julie J. Park, Associate Professor of Education, University of Maryland

Jenny Small, Associate Director for Education and Content, Convergence

Varun Soni, Dean of Religious Life, University of Southern California

D-L Stewart, Professor and Co-Chair of the Student Affairs in Higher Education  
Program, Colorado State University

Ryan Wells, Professor and Director of the Center for  
Student Success Research, UMASS

# Acknowledgements

We owe a debt of gratitude to many people who were instrumental in administering IDEALS, making meaning of the data, supporting campus partners, and disseminating findings to initiate real and lasting change.

Former team members Laura Dahl, Assistant Professor at North Dakota State University, and Ben Correia-Harker, Associate Director of Engineering and Innovation Leadership Development at Marquette University, were actively engaged in all phases of IDEALS and played key roles preparing findings for this comprehensive report.

The IDEALS team has included many postdoctoral research fellows over the past five years: Becky Crandall, Zak Foste, Tiffani Riggers-Piehl, and Lini Zhang were invaluable to the study and continue to be involved in disseminating research findings.

In the early years of IDEALS, graduate research associates Paulina Abaunza, Tara Hudson, Marc Lo, Ben Selznick, Matt Starcke, and Kai Zhao supported survey administration in myriad capacities. Many of them continue to collaborate with the IDEALS team as thought partners and scholarly writers.

Julia Ahrns, Eleanor Chappell, Zach Hooten, Courtenay Klauber, Graham Knight, Eric McChesney, Carolyn Rausch, Suzanne Schier-Happell, Musbah Shaheen, Jenn Sheridan, Garrett Sims, and Wu Xie were vital contributors to the case study dimension of IDEALS—volunteering their time for data cleaning, analysis, and reporting—and they continue to assist with dissemination of study findings across a variety of public and scholarly platforms.

Former IFYC staff members Lisa Davidson, Alana Kinarsky, Rachel Schwartz, and J.T. Snipes played crucial roles as part of the IDEALS team, fostering relationships with campus partners and using study findings to advance interfaith cooperation on college campuses in innovative ways.

Finally, we would like to recognize support from our funders, including The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The John E. Fetzer Institute, and Julian Grace Foundation, without whom IDEALS would not have been possible.

## Recommended Citation

Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Giess, M. E., Morin, S. M., Staples, B. A., Correia-Harker, B. P., & Associates. (2020). *IDEALS: Bridging religious divides through higher education*. Interfaith Youth Core.

