



Friendships Matter

The Role of Peer Relationships in
Interfaith Learning and Development

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IDEALS

INTERFAITH DIVERSITY
EXPERIENCES & ATTITUDES
LONGITUDINAL SURVEY

Few other sources of influence make a greater impact on college students than their peers.^{1&2} Engaging a diverse peer group cultivates students' understanding and appreciation of other cultures and reduces prejudice.³ Close friendships with peers of other walks of life are especially powerful when it comes to building appreciation and reducing prejudice because such relationships involve deep emotional investment and sustained interactions between the friends over time.⁴ Friendships like these make a lasting impression on students, as the positive qualities they inspire persist after students graduate,^{5&6} shaping the ways they participate in their communities and workplaces. Other evidence suggests that the benefits of friendships across difference can extend beyond the friends themselves, building appreciation for and reducing prejudice toward members of other cultural groups.^{7&8} In the end, supporting students' friendships across difference can have positive developmental consequences for all students on campus and may improve the overall campus climate for diversity.

To date, little is known about the prevalence and influence of close friendships across religious and worldview differences (i.e., "interworldview friendships"). How common are such friendships among U.S. college students? Are students more likely to have at least one close interworldview friendship after their first year on campus? In what ways do these relationships affect student attitudes and personal growth? And how can colleges and universities support the development of these relationships? The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is the first national study of its kind to address these critical questions about college students' friendship formation across religious and worldview differences. The study follows a cohort of students who attended 122 diverse colleges and universities between 2015 and 2019, tracking changes in interfaith learning and development—as well as trends in their friendships—over time. This report reflects 7,194 students who responded to the first two waves of IDEALS in 2015 and 2016.

- ⁵ Gurin, P., Dey, E. L., Gurin, G., & Hurtado, S. (2004). The educational value of diversity. In P. Gurin, J. S. Lehman, & E. Lewis (Eds.), *Defending diversity: Affirmative action at the University of Michigan* (pp. 97-188). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- ⁶ Jayakumar, U. (2008). Can higher education meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and global society? Campus diversity and cross-cultural workforce competencies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(4), 615-651.
- ⁷ Bowman, N. A., & Griffin, T. M. (2012). Secondary transfer effects of interracial contact: The moderating role of social status. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(1), 35-44.
- ⁸ Pettigrew, T. F. (2009). Secondary transfer effect of contact: Do intergroup contact effects spread to noncontacted outgroups? *Social Psychology*, 40(2), 55-65.

Interworldview Friendships

Close relationships across religious and worldview differences



¹ Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college?: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

² Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. with E. T. Pascarella and P. T. Terenzini (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (vol. 3). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

³ Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Morin, S., Crandall, R. E., & Selznick, B. (2015). Fostering the pluralism orientation of college students through interfaith co-curricular engagement. *The Review of Higher Education*, 39(1), 25-58.

⁴ Davies, K., Tropp, L. R., Aron, A., Pettigrew, T. F., & Wright, S. C. (2011). Cross-group friendships and intergroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15, 332-335.

Ready to Engage

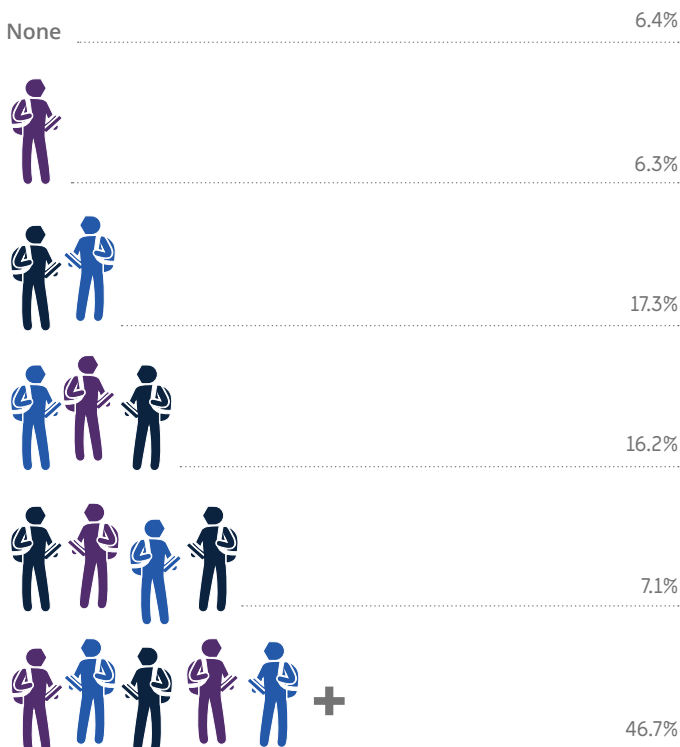
Students are Primed for Interworldview Friendship in Their First Year on Campus

Students come to college with experience in interworldview friendship formation. Muslim students and political liberals have the most exposure to friendships across religious and worldview divides. Close friendships with atheists are more common than close friendships with religious minorities.

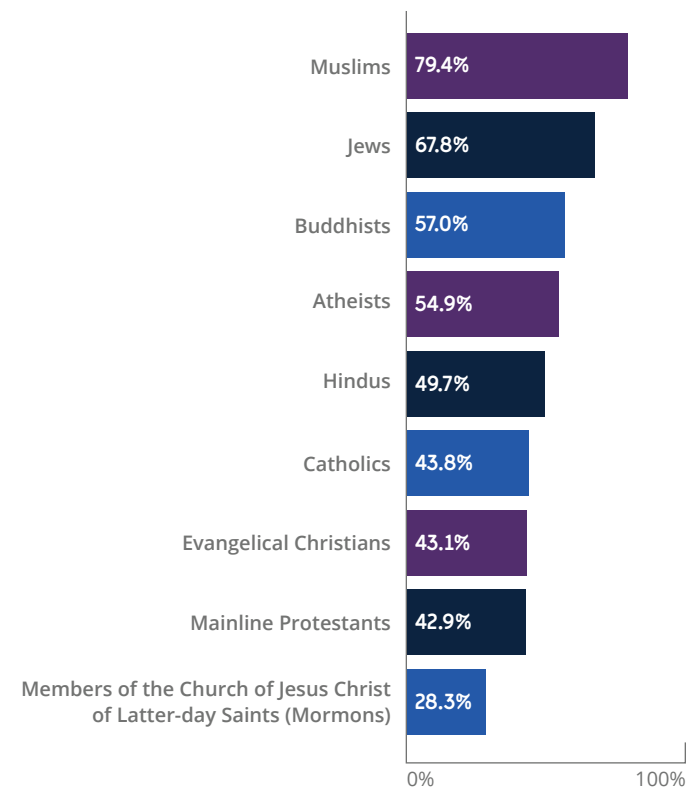
The vast majority (94%) of college students report having at least one friend of a different religious or non-religious perspective as they begin their first term on campus. Nearly half of first-term students (47%) report having five or more interworldview friends, while an equal share (47%) claim to have one to four friends of a worldview other than their own. Only a small number (6%) have no friends of other perspectives. In sum, most students come to their campuses with some experience in bridging worldview divides through the friendships they cultivate.

Who are the students with the most interworldview friendships? The tendency to affiliate with five or more friends of different religious or secular identities is related to students' own worldview identity and political orientation. Muslims (79%), Jews (68%), Buddhists (57%), and atheists (55%) are the most inclined to have a considerable number of religiously diverse friends as they are beginning their first term on campus. For these groups, a host of factors may explain their proclivities for engaging religiously diverse friends. Perhaps they grew up in religiously diverse communities where potential friends of other backgrounds were present in larger numbers; maybe some proactively sought out friendships to learn about others' worldviews and disrupt stereotypes

Number of Close Friends with Different Religious/Non-religious Perspectives Reported by Students at College Entry



Percentage of Students with Five or More Interworldview Friendships at College Entry, by Worldview Identity



about their own; or possibly others were encouraged by their family or faith tradition to reach across religious boundaries.

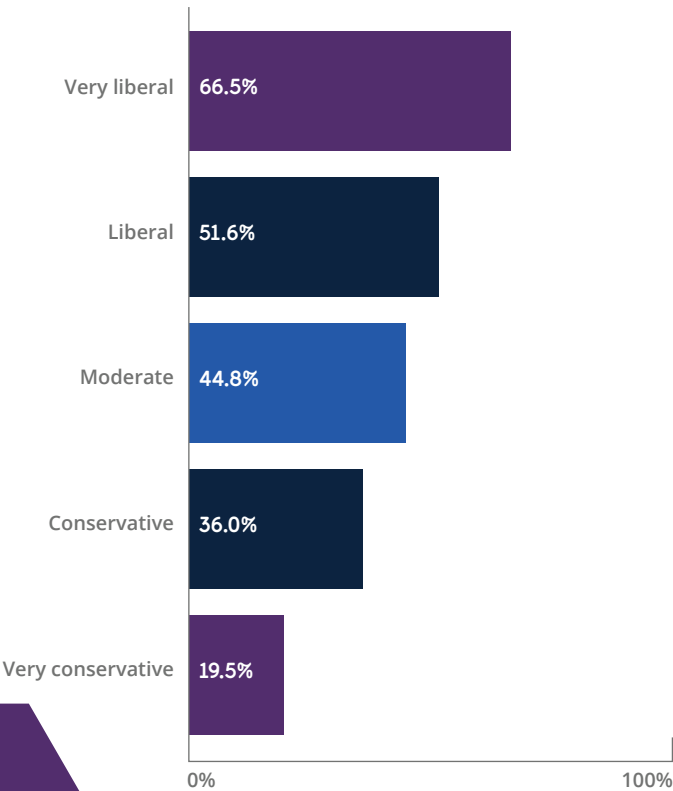
Political ideology also factors into college students' friendship patterns. Students who are "very liberal" are the most likely group to say they have five or more interworldview friendships (67%) in their first term on campus, while those who are "very conservative" are the least likely (20%). Moderates fall in between, with 45% reporting five or more friends of other worldviews.

In addition to indicating the number of religiously diverse friends they engage, first-term college students also reported the identities of people with whom they share a close relationship. IDEALS asks about friendships with people of other worldviews, as well as people of other social identities (e.g., people of a different sexual orientation, people who are very different politically). Close friendships across racial (72%) and sexual orientation (59%) differences are more common than friendships with people of particular religious or worldview identities. Although a sizeable number of students have close atheist friends (61%), and to a somewhat lesser extent "spiritual but not religious" friends (53%), politically different friends (53%), and

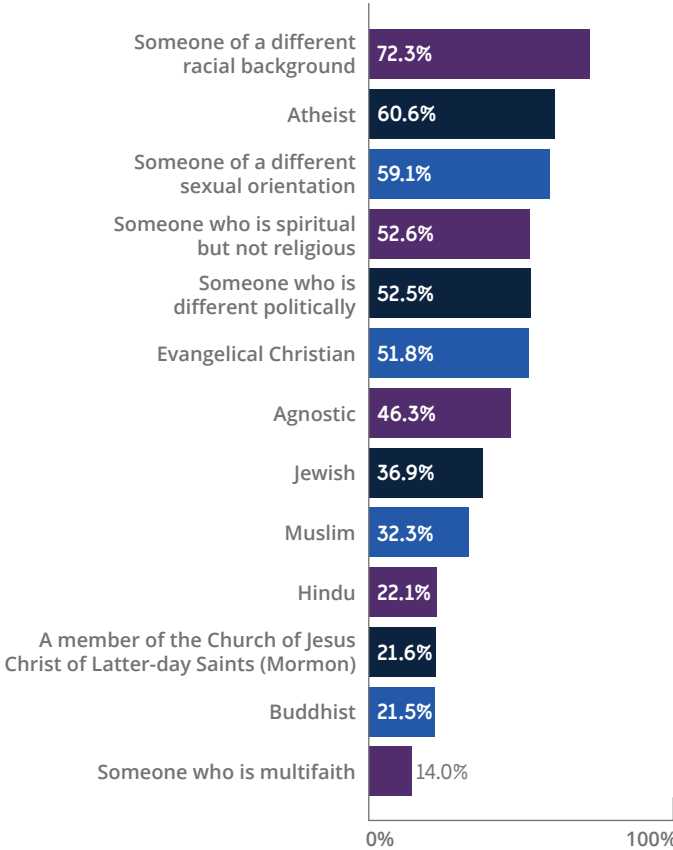
Evangelical Christian friends (52%), less than half of students report having a close friend who identifies as agnostic, multifaith, or as a member of a religious minority group (i.e., Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, Muslim).



Percentage of Students with Five or More Interworldview Friendships at College Entry, by Political Ideology



Identities of Close Friends Reported by Students at College Entry



Keeping Friends and Making More

Most Students Maintain or Gain Close Interworldview Friendships Over the First Year on Campus

The majority of students reporting no close interworldview friendships at the start of college report having at least one by the end of the first year, with a notable proportion reporting five or more. Yet some students report losing close interworldview friendships, a pattern that is not widespread but concerning.

Students report little change in the number of close interworldview friendships at the beginning of their first year on campus and at the end, although the proportions of students reporting “none,” or “one,” or “four” close friends at the end of their first year decrease slightly. Overall, there is a small increase in the number of close interworldview friends that students report. Yet given how important these relationships are for students’ diversity-related learning and development, how might educators support more pronounced friendship gains—especially among students initially reporting no close interworldview friendships at college entry?

It turns out that small overall changes in each friendship category (e.g., none, one, two) tell only part of the story. Another way to look at change is to identify the categories students move to in the first year given where they start. When we do so, a lot of individual movement becomes apparent. For instance, 64% of students who had no interworldview friendships when they began college made at least one friend in the first year (and 20% of this group reported making five or more friends). Yet it’s still striking that 37% continued to have no interworldview friendships. What is holding this group back from developing close friendships with their peers of different worldviews?



Percentage Change in the Number of Close Interworldview Friendships Across the First Year of College

Number of interworldview friendships	% at beginning of first year	% at end of first year	Change
None	6.4%	5.8%	-0.6
One	6.3%	5.3%	-1.0
Two	17.3%	17.3%	0.0
Three	16.2%	18.1%	1.9
Four	7.1%	6.6%	-0.5
Five or more	46.7%	46.9%	0.2

The vast majority (94%) of students who started college with one to four interworldview friendships either maintained friendships at that level or made more. Among students who started with five or more friends, 68% remained at that level, but 30% appear to have lost some of those friendships (while keeping at least one). Perhaps these are people who moved from religiously diverse high schools or regions to institutions or regions that are less so. Or, perhaps such a high number of interworldview friendships is difficult to maintain during a period of adjustment in the first year on campus.

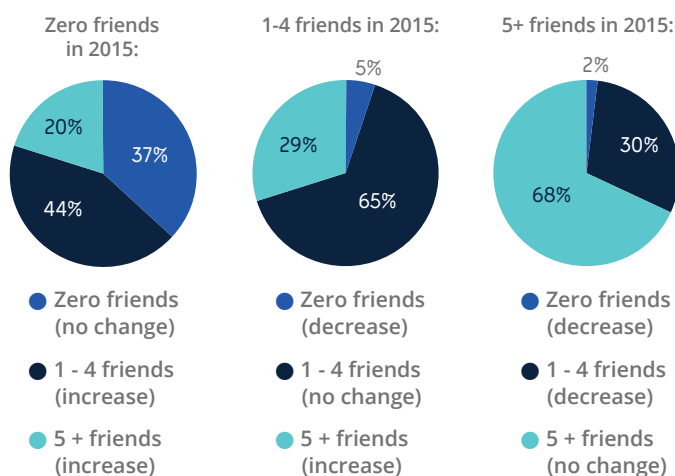
While the proportions of students who reported losing all close interworldview friendships during their first year were small (5% for students initially reporting 1-4 friends and 2% for those reporting 5 or more), these findings are concerning as they indicate that some students struggle to maintain their existing interworldview relationships in college, with possible negative consequences for their diversity-related learning and development. Could this be because the quality or closeness of these relationships is not strong enough to sustain the friendships in the long term? Are friendship losses the result of changes in proximity or perhaps changes in life priorities? How can colleges and universities support students in maintaining their existing interworldview relationships in the transition to college?

Examining changes over the first year on campus in the number of students reporting close friends from different worldviews reveals increases for most groups. After one year of college, students report more interworldview friendships with people who are different politically, of a different sexual orientation, agnostic, Muslim, spiritual but not religious, atheist, and Jewish. Students are less likely to form friendships with Hindus, multifaith people, people from a different racial background, Buddhists, Evangelical Christians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Close friendships with individuals in these groups remain relatively unchanged across the first year. The more pronounced changes might be explained by increased exposure to peers of different backgrounds; on average, students often have a more diverse set of potential friends to choose from in college than in high school. While campus diversity is obviously necessary for the formation of friendships across difference, it is not sufficient; other institutional factors, such as institutional support, campus climate, and opportunities for meaningful interaction with diverse peers, influence the likelihood of college students developing friendships with peers different from themselves.^{9&10}

- ⁹ Gurin, P., Dey, E. L., Gurin, G., & Hurtado, S. (2004). The educational value of diversity. In P. Gurin, J. S. Lehman, & E. Lewis (Eds.), *Defending diversity: Affirmative action at the University of Michigan* (pp. 97-188). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- ¹⁰ Milem, J. F., Chang, M. J., & Antonio, A. I. (2005). *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from <http://www.wesleyan.edu/partnerships/mei/files/makingdiversityworkoncampus.pdf>.

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Percent of Close Interworldview Friendships in 2016 (After One Year On Campus)



Context is Critical

Environmental Conditions on Campus Can Support—or Undermine—Interworldview Friendship Development

Campus characteristics such as climate and religious affiliation are associated with friendship development, some positively and some negatively. Student experiences, such as opportunities to socialize with peers from diverse worldview backgrounds, are also associated with interworldview friendship formation in the first year on campus.

Friendships are influenced by the environment in which they are situated. Characteristics of the college or university students attend shape students' opportunities for and choices about making friends. These characteristics may include campus climate, size, composition of the student body, institutional policies and structures, and opportunities to participate in formal and informal interfaith experiences. What are the environmental conditions most associated with interworldview friendship development?

Accounting for the number of religiously diverse friends at the start of their first year on campus, students who had more interworldview friendships at the end of the year experienced a welcoming campus climate for diverse worldviews and social identities and had meaningful encounters with worldview diversity that challenged them to rethink stereotypes and assumptions about their own and others' beliefs. These students also engaged in formal interfaith activities (e.g., attending religious services for another tradition, working with students of other worldviews on service projects) and informal interfaith activities (e.g., dining, studying, socializing, and having conversations with people of other worldviews). Thus, not only should campus educators attend to ways they form

Environmental Conditions Related to Interworldview Friendship Development in the First Year of College

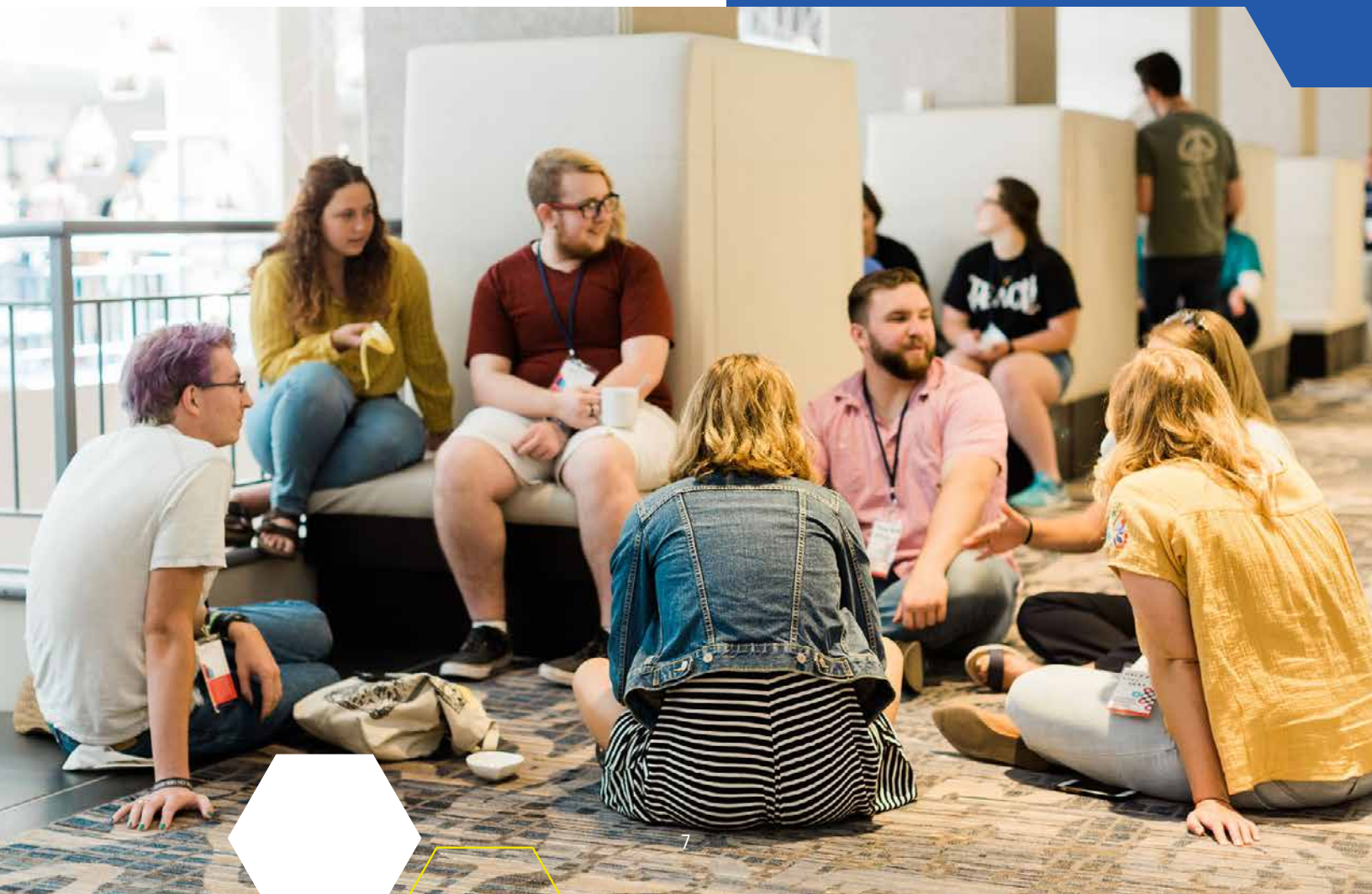


a hospitable campus for students of various worldviews, but they should also consider developing initiatives that encourage contact and foster meaningful interactions across those worldviews.

Environmental conditions that undermined interworldview friendship development included attending an Evangelical Protestant institution and experiencing insensitivity on campus. Students at Evangelical Protestant institutions may find themselves in more homogenous communities, so educators at these types of campuses may pay particular attention to helping students maintain interworldview friendships that originated in their home communities or build interworldview partnerships and experiences within the college's local community.

These findings from IDEALS confirm that environmental conditions influence college students' development of interworldview friendships. The good news is that many of these conditions are factors institutions can influence directly (such as opportunities for formal and informal socialization with peers from different worldviews) or indirectly (such as campus climate). College and university educators have the ability to shape conditions on their campuses to support interworldview friendship.

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Conflict is Not the End

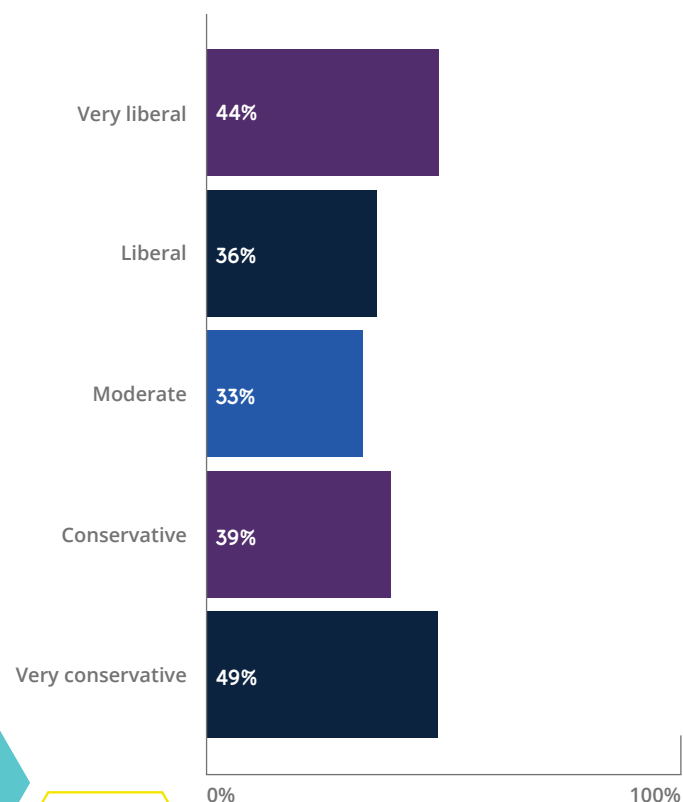
Students Show Friendship Tenacity in the Face of Religious and Political Disagreements

Students do not avoid religious and political conflict with their friends in their first year on campus. Atheists, Evangelical Christians, and Latter-day Saints—as well as students with far right and far left political ideologies—are the most engaged in religious disagreements that have productive outcomes.

Beyond college students' inclinations toward interworldview friendships—and the ways in which friendships change in their first year on campus—IDEALS also sheds lights on whether students maintain friendships in the midst of conflict. Despite social norms that cast religious and political conversations as taboo, many first-term college students nonetheless waded into these waters. During their first year on campus, 37% of students say they've had a significant disagreement with a friend about religion and remained friends. Perhaps reflective of the 2016 presidential election and the salience of politics during that season, an even higher number of students—52%—report having a significant disagreement with a friend about politics and remaining friends. Nearly two-thirds of first-term college students (64%) affirm that they stayed close to someone they cared about even though their religious or non-religious perspectives were incompatible.

Like proclivities toward interworldview friendship, relational endurance varies by student worldview and political orientation. Atheists (49%), Evangelical Christians (42%), and Latter-day Saints (41%) have higher than average rates of disagreeing with a friend about religion and remaining friends. Moreover, when

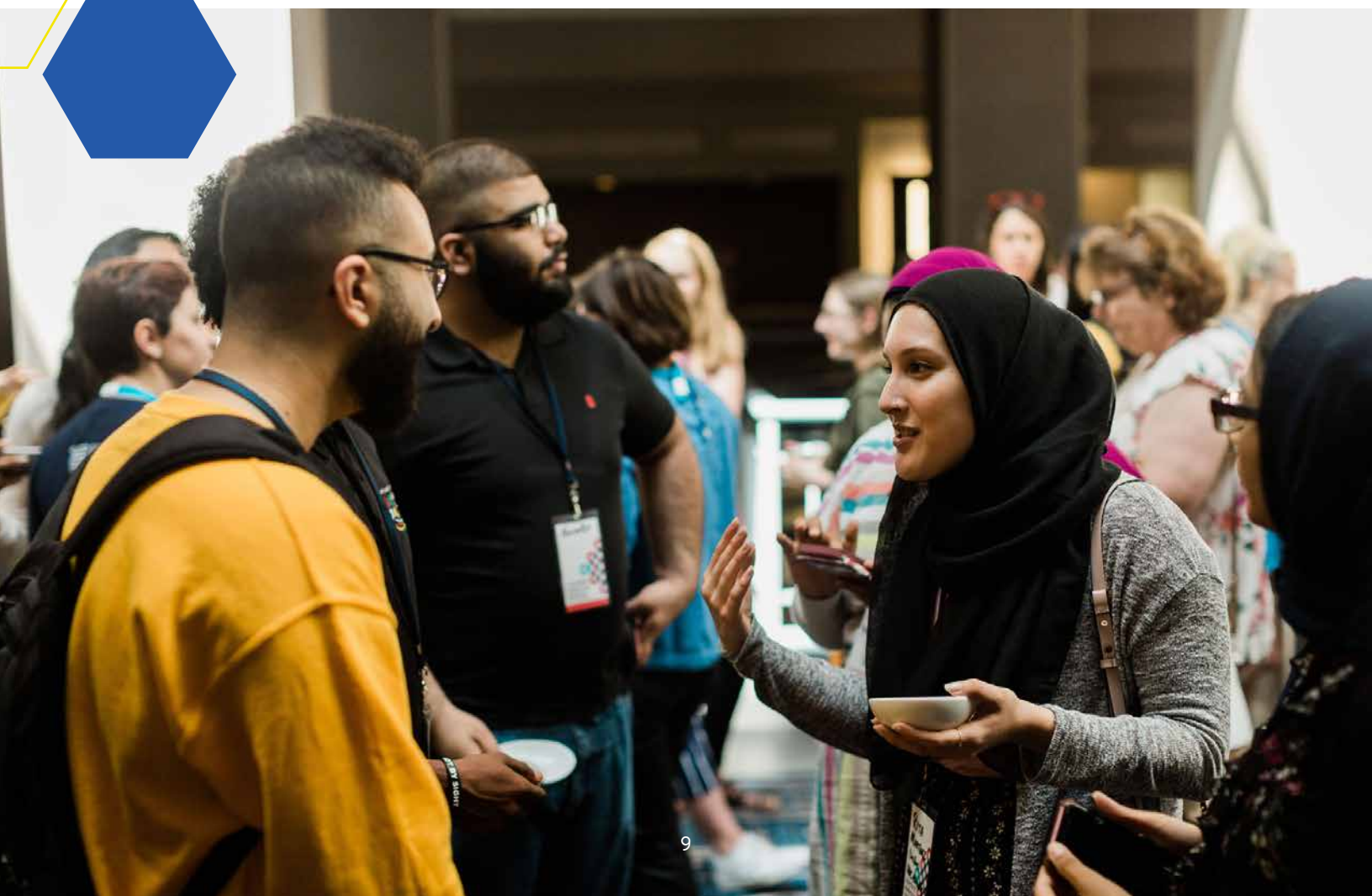
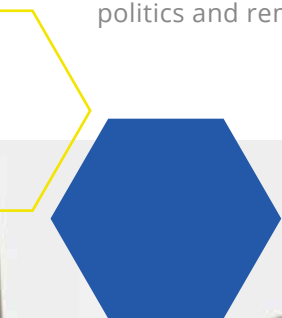
Percentage of Students Who Report Disagreeing About Religion and Remaining Friends, by Political Leaning



it comes to political ideology, students at both ends of the political spectrum—including those who are very conservative (49%) and those who are very liberal (44%)—are more inclined than those with centrist orientations to disagree with a friend about religion and remain friends. Many of these political and worldview groups share in common their commitment to beliefs and values that may be misunderstood or viewed by others as radical or countercultural. Perhaps they have more conflicts than other students as they encounter friends of opposing points of view. Nonetheless, many of these first-term students appear practiced in navigating conflict productively and maintaining their friendships along the way.

Turning to experiencing significant disagreements about politics and remaining friends, Jews (62%) are the highest above the average compared to other groups. Along the political spectrum, conservatives (61%) are the most inclined to have this experience, followed by those who identify as very liberal (54%), liberal (54%), and very conservative (51%). Fewer than half of moderates (47%) disagree with a friend about politics and remain friends.

Worldview groups that are well above the average in terms of staying close to someone who has incompatible beliefs include atheists (68%) and Muslims (70%). Considering differences by political orientation, there is not tremendous variation, as the rate of staying close to someone with incompatible beliefs ranges from 60% (moderates) to 68% (very conservative), with the conservative (65%), very liberal (65%), and liberal (67%) individuals falling somewhere in between.

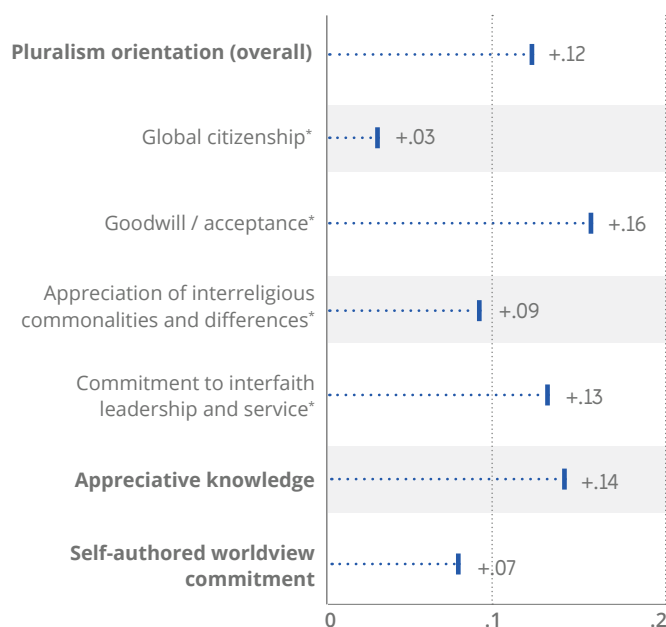


A Key Ingredient

Interworldview Friendship Builds Students' Interfaith Capacity in the First Year on Campus

Friendships with those of different worldviews cultivates college students' interfaith learning and development above and beyond institutional conditions and other college experiences.

Correlations Between Number of Interworldview Friendships and Outcomes in the First Year on Campus



* Subscale of pluralism orientation

As the number of interworldview friendships increases there is a positive effect.

To this point in the report, we have explored rates of and changes in students' interworldview friendships in the first year on campus, as well as how campus conditions and relational conflict impact the friendships that students have. The sections that follow explore how interworldview friendships affect other dimensions of students' lives, from their openness toward and appreciation of others to the ways that they see themselves religiously and spiritually.

One of the aims of the IDEALS study is to understand how students' religious diversity attitudes and behaviors change over their time in college. We focus on three outcomes in particular: (1) pluralism orientation (comprised of four components: global citizenship, goodwill/acceptance, appreciating interreligious commonalities and differences, and commitment to interfaith leadership and service), (2) appreciative knowledge, and (3) self-authored worldview commitment. Pluralism orientation concerns 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. Appreciative knowledge describes one's familiarity with teachings, traditions, rituals, practices, or people that reflect positive attributes of different religious, spiritual, and non-religious worldviews. 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.

Evident in the definitions of all three outcomes is the importance of meaningful interaction with others, including peers, for their achievement. Accordingly, the number of interworldview friendships students have in their first year on campus has a consistent positive relationship with all of these outcomes (controlling for students' scores on these outcomes in their first term), particularly appreciative knowledge, two aspects of pluralism orientation (goodwill/acceptance and commitment to interfaith leadership and service), and overall pluralism orientation. In an analysis that accounted for demographic characteristics, institutional qualities, and other relevant college experiences, Hudson, Rockenbach, Zhang, and Mayhew¹¹ identified

¹¹ Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., Zhang, L., & Mayhew, M. J. (2019). Interworldview friendship as a predictor of college students' pluralism orientation: Evidence from a national longitudinal study. Unpublished manuscript.

the same pattern.

Indeed, evidence from IDEALS shows that friendship matters over and above conditions and experiences such as a welcoming campus climate, support to freely express one's worldview, and meaningful yet challenging encounters with diverse peers. Friendship also has a positive association with students' achievement of these outcomes beyond the effects of casual interfaith behaviors such as dining, studying, socializing, and having conversations with someone of a different religious or non-religious perspective. Thus, it appears that the relationship of friendship is a powerful facilitator of college students' interfaith learning and development. Through friendships with diverse peers, college students develop the skills and dispositions that they will need in order to meaningfully participate in their communities, workplaces, and democratic society after graduation. Supporting college students' interworldview friendships should therefore be an educational priority for colleges and universities.

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Inspiring Appreciation

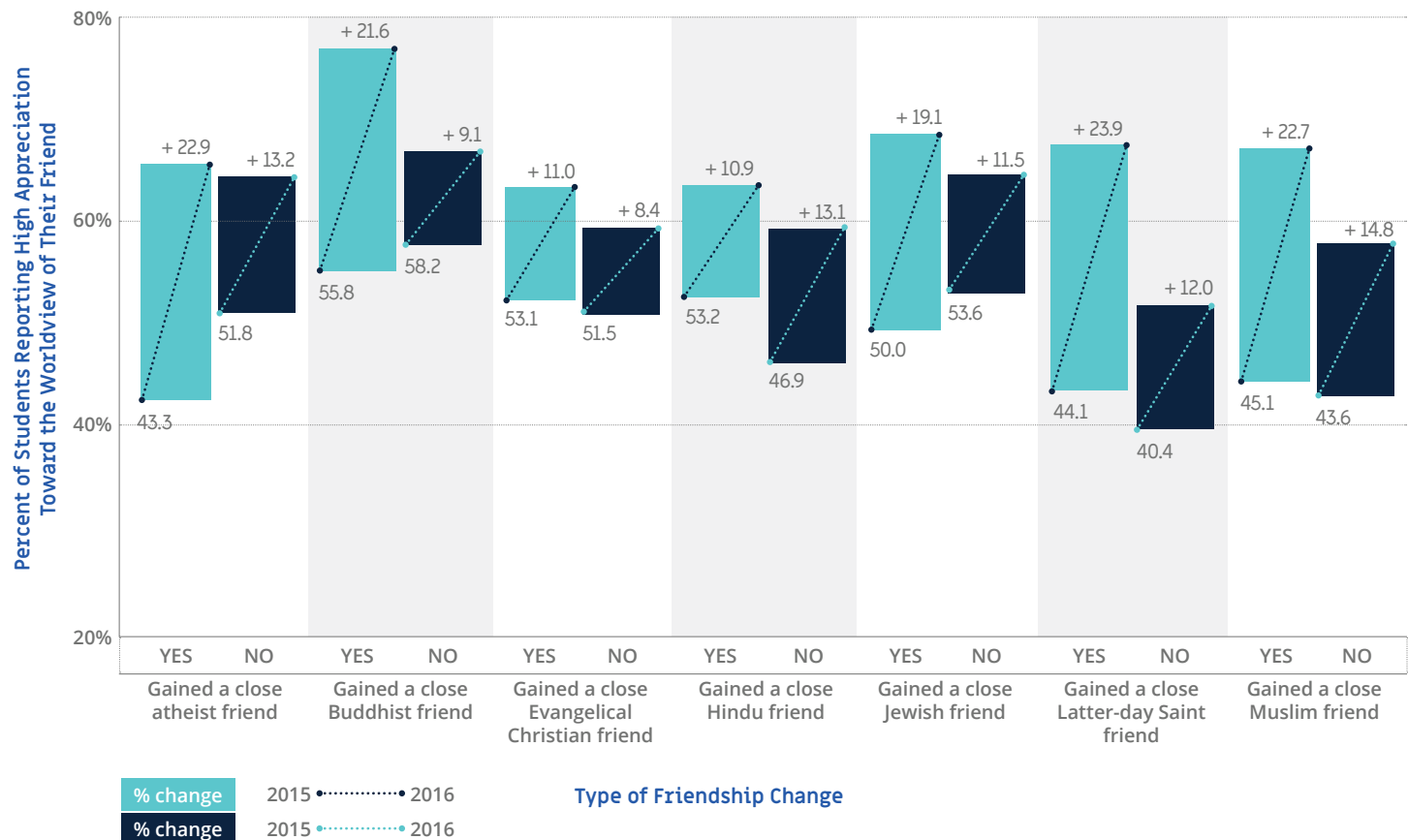
Close Friendships Promote Positive Attitude Change Toward the Worldview of One's Friend...and Worldviews Beyond the Friendship

Developing a close friendship with an atheist, Buddhist, Evangelical Christian, Jew, Latter-day Saint, or Muslim during the first year on campus encourages pronounced change in positive attitudes toward the friend's worldview. These close interworldview friendships also generate positive regard for people of religious and secular identities outside of the friendship.

How do friendships across religious and secular differences promote attitude change? By and large, students who become close friends with someone of a particular worldview group in their first year on campus make significant gains in appreciative attitudes toward that group compared to those who do not make such a friend. Appreciative attitudes reflect whether the student has a positive outlook on and feels a sense of commonality with people of a certain worldview identity—as well as whether they agree that people of that worldview make positive contributions to society and are ethical as individuals. A student is “highly” appreciative when they agree “strongly” or “somewhat” with each of these areas in relation to a particular group.

The chart below reveals the general trend that more students become highly appreciative of different worldview groups across their first year on campus regardless of their friendships. However, when students gain a close friend in that group, their attitude change is almost always more pronounced, at times close to double the change exhibited by those who do not make a friend in that group. For example, the proportion of students who are highly appreciative of Buddhists rose by 22 percentage points among those who had gained a close

Changes in Appreciative Attitudes Toward the Worldview of One's Friend, by Close Friendship Gains



Buddhist friend in the first year. Among those who did not gain a close Buddhist friend, the change was much lower at 9 percentage points. Likewise, twice as many students who gained a close Latter-day Saint friend became highly appreciative (24%) in the first year compared to those who did not (12%). The comparison of students who had gained a close Hindu friend versus those who did not is the only instance in which those who did not make a close friend exhibited greater attitude change. Nonetheless, the percent of students who are highly appreciative of Hindus was higher in both years among those who had gained a close Hindu friend.

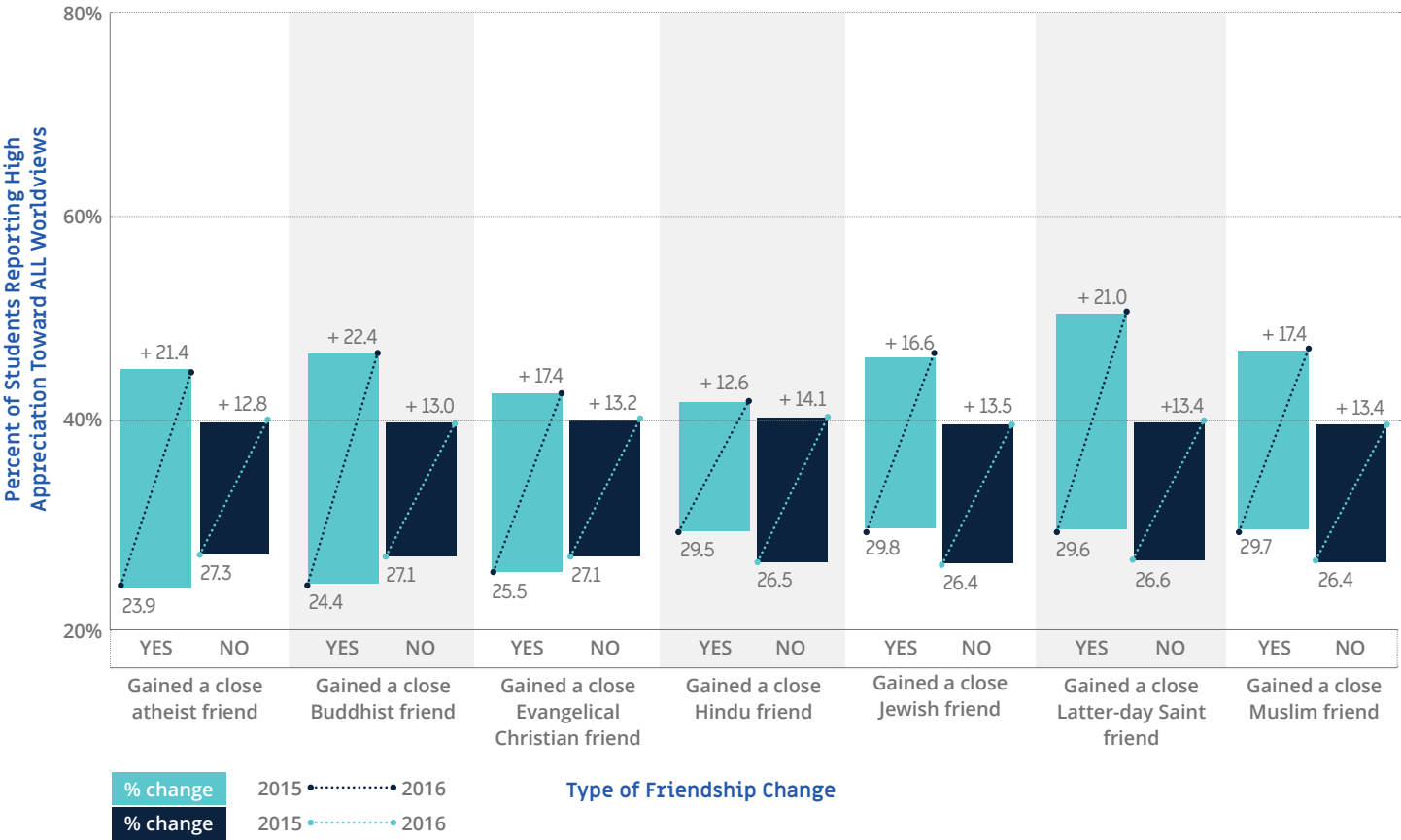
The positive effects of gaining a close friend in one group also appear to generalize to other outgroups.^{12&13} For instance, making a close atheist friend encourages students, on the whole, to become more appreciative of Buddhists, Evangelical Christians, Hindus, Jews, Latter-day Saints, and Muslims at the same time. Other research

¹² Bowman, N. A., & Griffin, T. M. (2012). Secondary transfer effects of interracial contact: The moderating role of social status. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18*(1), 35-44.

¹³ Pettigrew, T. F. (2009). Secondary transfer effect of contact: Do intergroup contact effects spread to noncontacted outgroups? *Social Psychology, 40*(2), 55-65.



Changes in Appreciative Attitudes Toward ALL Worldviews, by Close Friendship Gains



has shown that friendships between people of different backgrounds can also reduce prejudice among those outside the relationship. In other words, even if a student has no friends of other cultural or religious backgrounds, as long as they have one friend who does have that sort of friendship, the student may be less prejudiced themselves.^{14&15} In this way, the prejudice reduction that comes from friendship has the potential to spread throughout a college student's social network.

The chart on the previous page depicts the percent of students who were highly appreciative of all seven worldview groups at the beginning and end of their first year on campus, as well as changes across time. The percent of students who are highly appreciative toward all seven groups is higher at the end of the first year among those who made close friendship gains relative to those who did not, and the pattern holds for all types of close friendships. One of the more striking examples is the difference in appreciation between those who gained a close Latter-day Saint friend compared to their peers who did not. At the end of the first year on campus, nearly 51% of those who had gained a close Latter-day Saint friend were highly appreciative toward all worldviews—a

ten percentage point advantage over those who had not gained such a friend. In addition, the growth in the percentage of highly appreciative students is more pronounced for every type of friendship gain, with the exception of gaining a close Hindu friend.

¹⁴ Paolini, S., Hewstone, M., & Cairns, E. (2007). Direct and indirect intergroup friendship effects: Testing the moderating role of the affective-cognitive bases of prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(10), 1406-1420.

¹⁵ Turner, R. N., Hewstone, M., & Voci, A. (2007). Reducing explicit and implicit outgroup prejudice via direct and extended contact: The mediating role of self-disclosure and intergroup anxiety. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(3), 369-388.





“Who Am I?”

Interworldview Friendships Influence How Students Answer Enduring Existential Questions

Friendships that transcend worldview differences have the power to shape not only pluralism inclinations and appreciative attitudes; they also appear to inspire changes in how students see themselves religiously and spiritually.

Countless studies of college impact support the longstanding notion that peers and peer culture shape student outcomes.¹⁶ Little attention has been paid to the role of close peer friendships in students' own self-understanding, however, despite how much more proximal these relationships are and how much more instrumental they may be in facilitating change.

IDEALS asks students to describe how they perceive themselves religiously and spirituality from among four options: “both religious and spiritual,” “religious but not spiritual,” “spiritual but not religious,” or “neither religious nor spiritual.” Close to one-third of students change their religious and spiritual self-perceptions in their first year on campus. For those that make a change, peer culture and friendships play a significant role in facilitating change.

With respect to peer culture, on campuses where many students are changing religiously and spiritually, individual students have a higher likelihood of doing the same. In addition, while the number of friends of

¹⁶ Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. with E. T. Pascarella and P. T. Terenzini (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (vol. 3). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



different worldviews tends not to instigate changes in self-perceptions, having a close “spiritual but not religious” friend increases the chances that the individual student will also characterize their own identity as “spiritual but not religious” by the end of their first year on campus. At the same time, having a close “spiritual but not religious” friend reduces the chances that a student will shift their religious or spiritual identity in another direction (i.e., to “both religious and spiritual,” “religious but not spiritual,” or “neither religious nor spiritual”).¹⁷ In other words, the friendships that students develop in their first year on campus seem to do more than shape intergroup attitudes; they appear to have the power to influence students’ inner development and core features of their self-understanding and personal identity.

There are a number of possible mechanisms potentially producing changes in students’ religious and spiritual self-perceptions. Perhaps “spiritual but not religious” friends inspire students to critically reflect on their own identity, leading to a new outlook on the world. Then again, some students may feel pressured by their “spiritual but not religious” friends to let go of some religious conventions in favor of a spiritual orientation. It is also feasible that students see something desirable in the beliefs, values, and practices of their “spiritual but not religious” friends and attempt to imitate what they observe. Whether student change is the result of deep reflection versus the less conscious process of simply becoming more like the people with whom they spend the most time remains an open question.

In the end, these findings raise a number of questions for continued research and innovative practice. For instance, are there other aspects of student development that interworldview friendships potentially influence? How might friendships complement educational opportunities for critical self-reflection and personal development?

¹⁷ Rockenbach, A. N. (2019, April). Shifts in religious and spiritual self-perceptions in the first year of college. Paper presented at the Social Dimensions of Spirituality Conference, Indianapolis, IN.

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Conclusion and Implications

This report highlights the impact close interworldview friendships have on interfaith learning and development. Given this resounding and consistent connection, educators must be attentive to the power of peer relationships as they structure collegiate experiences to prepare graduates who are able to constructively engage in our religiously diverse democracy.

We assume many readers may wonder whether faculty, staff, and administrators can indeed influence the friendships that students form. Although direct oversight of students' friendships by educators is neither possible nor desirable, campus professionals are certainly able to cultivate a context where students are more likely to reach across lines of difference. To the right are three general steps you might consider to spark the development of interworldview friendships among students.

Peer influences certainly matter for students' growth. When conscientiously and skillfully attended to, not only do educators inspire friendships that directly benefit students, but they also work to strengthen the social fabric necessary for a thriving democracy.

1. Create the Conditions

Consider how you design physical spaces and programmatic experiences that put students of different worldviews in proximity and connection with one another. Locate spaces (such as for worship or club offices) for different worldviews near each other and make these spaces comfortable ones where students can just "hang out" together without pressure. Fund collaborative programs between different worldview groups as well as social opportunities such as shared meals. Establish orientation or residence life programming or general education initiatives that connect diverse students. Conditions like these can cultivate a welcoming, inclusive campus community and be seeds that grow into friendships as students regularly interact.

2. Set the Expectation

Often friendships happen organically and reflexively as a result of shared spaces and interests; what if students were encouraged to become more aware of their friendship patterns and to intentionally disrupt tendencies to seek only like-minded, religiously-similar friends? What can educators do? Craft narratives to students that encourage them to reflect upon their friendship circles and understand the benefits of friendships across difference. Incorporate reflection questions into campus-wide initiatives or traditions. Spotlight stories of student friendships in prominent spaces (such as convocation, commencement, or sporting events). Have a prominent person (such as the campus president) explicitly point out the desire for students to form these friendships during their collegiate career. When educators communicate such expectations, they aid in the establishment of a culture where engagement across worldview difference is normal; students can also become cognizant of the friendships they make and proactively seek out these relationships.

3. Model the Practice

Show students that you intentionally build interworldview relationships. Critically reflect on your own social circles at work. Participate in professional and social activities that give you opportunities to connect with others of different worldviews. Openly share about your worldview and how it shows up in your relationships. Educators who enact espoused values will reinforce a culture of interfaith cooperation and inspire students to seriously pursue diverse social circles and friendships.

Additional Resources

IFYC has a range of resources available for campuses to use, which can be found at [IFYC.org/resources](https://ifyc.org/resources). Below is a curated list that will be particularly helpful in cultivating conditions, setting expectations, and modeling behavior related to interworldview friendships.

[Religious Accommodations and Policies on Campus](#) ↗

This resource includes information about the various ways campuses create more welcoming and supportive spaces for a range of worldview identities.

[Creating an Interfaith Space on Campus](#) ↗

For those who want to establish a physical space that can lead to more casual interactions between those of different religious and non-religious identities, this document provides considerations and tips for creating an interfaith room or space.

[Identifying a Theology or Ethic of Interfaith Cooperation](#) ↗

Talking with friends and colleagues about religious or secular beliefs can be difficult at times. This resource will guide you in ways of thinking about your own worldview that can help you meaningfully share narratives from your tradition and beliefs with others.

[Building Regular Interfaith Dialogue through Generous Engagement \(BRIDGE\)](#) ↗

This curriculum is a powerful way to engage colleagues in conversations on worldview identity that can bring attention to the need to discuss religious and non-religious beliefs on campus and help staff and faculty feel more comfortable doing so.



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Recommended Citation

Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., Morin, S., & Associates (2019). *Friendships matter: The role of peer relationships in interfaith learning and development*. Chicago, IL: Interfaith Youth Core.

The IDEALS project is supported by funders including The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, and the Julian Grace Foundation.