

Research Corner

Studies and analysis from the world of liberal education



IN GOOD FAITH

The United States is undergoing immense demographic changes. The immigrant share of the population is approaching a record high, according to the Pew Research Center; meanwhile, Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, and Christians—while still in the religious majority—are declining proportionally in contrast to Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and the religiously unaffiliated, according to the Public Religion Research Institute. In recent years, societal divisions have been laid bare through religiously motivated marginalization and violence, including sharp rises in incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Deep religious divides are also shaping and challenging our civic and professional communities. In higher ed, more attention to religious identity—alongside race, gender, and sexual identities—is needed as leaders advance diversity and inclusion on their campuses.

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), led by Alyssa N. Rockenbach at North Carolina State University, Matthew J. Mayhew at The Ohio State University, and Interfaith Youth Core, queried students on 122 campuses when they entered college in 2015, again after their first year, and in their senior year in 2019. IDEALS findings—highlights of which are presented on these pages—illuminate whether and how students are learning to build bridges across lines of religious difference and point to best practices for higher education leaders striving to address our nation's deep divisions. Learn more at ifyc.org/navigating-religious-diversity.

WORLVIEW A person's religious, spiritual, or nonreligious outlook on life

INTERFAITH The coming together of people who orient differently around religion

Student Perspectives on Bridging Religious Divides

While students see the importance of engaging across religious difference, few pursue opportunities to do so.

Percentage who "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" that

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."

Percentage who participated in the following formal interfaith activities while in college:

38% attended religious services for a religious tradition that is not their own.

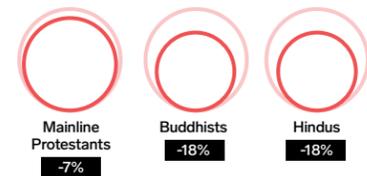
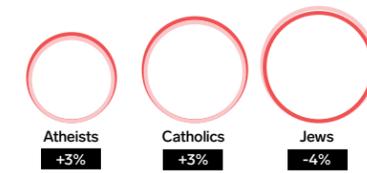
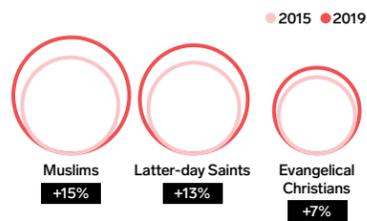
26% enrolled in a religion course on campus specifically designed to enhance their knowledge of different religious traditions.

14% participated in an interfaith dialogue on campus.

11% engaged in an interfaith action, such as having an impact on critical issues like hunger or poverty.

9% took part in interfaith or religious diversity training on campus.

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



The percentage of students highly committed to bridging religious divides was lower in certain groups than the overall average of 70%.

70% Overall average

68% STEM majors
67% Men
66% Atheists
65% Evangelical Christians

63% Politically conservative individuals

51% Very politically conservative individuals



70% OF STUDENTS, BY THE END OF THEIR FOURTH YEAR OF COLLEGE, SAID THEY WERE HIGHLY COMMITTED TO BRIDGING RELIGIOUS DIVIDES.

The Promise of Interfaith Friendships

Interfaith friendships flourish in college but may not prepare students to navigate deep differences.



93% of students reported at least one interfaith friendship by their fourth year of college.



49% reported having five or more friends of other worldviews.

BUT

59% of fourth-year students never had a disagreement with friends about religion, even though those differences likely exist within interfaith friendships.

Insights from IDEALS might help explain student hesitancy when it comes to disagreements about religion:

Only 65% of students agreed that they felt confident navigating conversations involving deep disagreement.

59% reported staying quiet at least occasionally during challenging conversations to avoid conflict.

63% felt people on campus interacted primarily within their own religious or worldview communities, therefore avoiding differences altogether.

Yet IDEALS also suggests that interfaith friendships are resilient and can provide meaningful opportunities for growth.



Among the 41% of students who had disagreed with a friend about religious matters, the vast majority said they remained friends after the disagreement.

Percentage of students who "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" that

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."

The Intersection of Religion and Politics

After promising growth in the first year, student attitudes toward political conservatives steadily declined more steeply than attitudes toward any other identity group.

Change in positive attitudes toward political conservatives from the second to fourth year of college among

2016 2019

Catholics -11%

Muslims -3%

Jews -13%

Mainline Protestants -7%

Buddhists -15%

Evangelical Christians -8%

Latter-day Saints -18%

Atheists -9%

Hindus -20%



Student Learning about Diverse Religious Identities

Percentage of students who "somewhat" or "strongly" agreed they took time to learn about

People of a different race/ethnicity **74%**

People of a different country **73%**

Politically liberal people **69%**

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people **67%**

Politically conservative people **62%**

Transgender people **61%**

Muslims **46%**

Jews **40%**

Evangelical Christians **40%**

Buddhists **33%**

Atheists **33%**

Hindus **27%**

Latter-day Saints **22%**

Read more

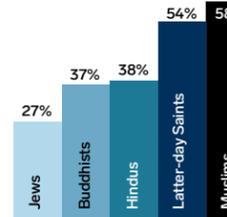
Interfaith Cooperation for Our Times: Educating Citizens for a Diverse Democracy
Edited by Dawn Michele Whitehead and Janett I. Cordovés

Campus Climate

Students' experiences of the campus climate for worldview diversity differ depending on their religious identity—with some groups feeling unwelcome and unsupported.



Percentage of religious minority students who "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their campus is welcoming of religious diversity

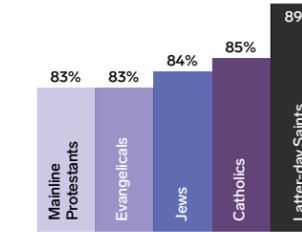


Meanwhile, 50% of Christian students did not believe their campuses were receptive to religious diversity overall.

23% of evangelical and 22% of Catholic students felt pressured to limit expression of their religious beliefs.

26% of evangelicals felt compelled to separate their religious beliefs from their academic experience, higher than every other group except Hindus (36%).

Overwhelmingly, however, students agreed there was a place on campus where they could express their worldview. These groups reported the highest levels of agreement:



Recommendations

As an institution

- Send the message that you value all religious and worldview identities.
- Focus on teaching positive regard for all.
- Expand religious, spiritual, or interfaith diversity policies.
- Make interfaith experiences mandatory for all students.
- Expand interfaith programming.

As an educator

- Challenge assumptions and prompt perspective taking.
- Create occasions for interfaith friendships to flourish.
- Provide opportunities for informal interaction between religiously diverse students.
- Appeal to students whose interfaith competencies warrant special attention.

Positive attitudes toward politically liberal people generally increased. Students identifying with more politically conservative religions (such as evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints) made meaningful gains in their positive attitudes toward political liberals.