

Incoming Catholic Students

Religion and worldview are frequently centerpieces of civic and political conversations in the U.S. today. Higher education remains at the forefront of these exchanges, as questions persist concerning how educators prepare young adults for effective leadership in an increasingly diverse global society. To address these questions, the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) was launched in 2015. The survey was designed to examine the institutional conditions and educational practices that help students develop their sense of appreciation for religiously diverse peers and knowledge of different worldviews through interfaith encounters while in college. IDEALS tracks a national cohort of students from 122 higher education institutions over three time points: as they enter college, after their first year in college, and at the end of their college experience.

Results from the first of three IDEALS administrations offer a snapshot of participants' readiness to engage with interfaith diversity upon entering college and highlight intergroup differences based on worldview identification. This narrative report explores a host of distinctive characteristics among entering first-year Catholic college students participating in IDEALS.

WHO ARE TODAY'S CATHOLIC COLLEGE STUDENTS?

Among the 20,436 students who completed IDEALS in the fall of 2015, 23% claim a Roman Catholic worldview (n = 4,427), a larger proportion than the 16% of Catholic millennials nationwide (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2015). Of those, more than two-thirds are female (69%), and nearly all other respondents are male (31%); less than one percent indicated another gender identity. Nineteen percent of Catholic students surveyed are Latino, compared to just 5% of non-Catholic IDEALS respondents. This may be somewhat unsurprising in light of steady racial and ethnic diversity gains within the U.S. Catholic church in recent years (PRC, 2015). The composition of remaining racial identities includes 3% - African-American/Black, 7% - Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% - Multiracial, and 59% - White (with Native American and "other" identities reported at less than one percent). Individuals holding a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identity comprise 5% of all Catholic survey respondents.

With respect to political orientation, IDEALS data revealed that less than one-third of Catholic students consider themselves "liberal" or "very liberal" (30%), in contrast to 42% of their non-Catholic counterparts. When asked about their religious and spiritual leanings, 18% of Catholic students identified as "religious but not spiritual." However, a majority (55%) believe the category "both spiritual and religious" more accurately represents them. Only 9% of Catholic IDEALS respondents described themselves as "neither spiritual nor religious," compared to 26% of non-Catholics, highlighting entering Catholic students' inclination toward religion or spirituality. Additionally, a uniquely high proportion of Catholic respondents pointed to family background and traditions as the foremost influence on their current worldview (49%, compared to 32% of non-Catholics).

WHAT DO CATHOLIC STUDENTS KNOW AND VALUE ABOUT DIFFERENT WORLDVIEW GROUPS?

When asked about different religious and secular worldview traditions, Catholic students answered questions about Judaism and Islam correctly at rates similar to their peers. They demonstrated lower levels of knowledge about atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Mormonism than other students. Knowledge gaps may be related to friendship patterns: Catholics (relative to non-Catholics) are less likely to have close friends who are Atheist, Buddhist, Hindu, or LDS/Mormon. Notably, though only 17% of Catholic survey respondents reported having a close LDS/Mormon friend (compared to 22% of non-Catholics), they more commonly agreed “somewhat” or “strongly” that they have a generally positive attitude toward Latter-Day Saints/Mormons (65%, compared to 60% of non-Catholics).

With respect to political ideologies, Catholic students stood out in several regards. Though the majority (55%) have friends who are different from them politically—a proportion similar among non-Catholics—they tended to demonstrate more favorable views toward conservatives. Incoming Catholics largely believed that politically conservative people make positive contributions to society (58%) and that they are generally ethical people (55%). Sixty percent of Catholic IDEALS participants agreed they have things in common with politically conservative people, while just 12% disagreed. Conversely, fully 21% of students with non-Catholic worldviews did not perceive commonalities with conservatives. These findings are congruent with the right-leaning political perspectives of Catholics in the IDEALS cohort.

HOW “PRIMED” ARE CATHOLIC STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH INTERFAITH DIVERSITY?

We know that Catholic students’ worldviews are largely shaped by family influences, so it makes sense that only 19% had high levels of self-authored worldview commitment before college (i.e., “I have thoughtfully considered other religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to my current worldview”; “I have had to reconcile competing religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to my current worldview”; “I talked and listened to people with points of view different than my own before committing to my worldview”; and “I integrated multiple points of view into my existing worldview before committing to it”). In other words, these students were less likely than their peers to have talked with individuals of different backgrounds (48%, compared 56%). They also integrated multiple points of view less when formulating their worldviews (48%, compared to 53%). However, IDEALS findings suggest that Catholics were more likely than their non-Catholic peers to attend interfaith prayer services (26%, compared to 16%) and to discuss religious diversity in the classroom (60%, compared to 57%) in the twelve months prior to college. Interestingly, Catholic survey respondents were also distinct in their rates of community service involvement, with 88% claiming participation in service sometime in the year before college (compared to 84% of non-Catholics). Collectively, these pre-college behaviors suggest a possible openness to participation in related activities at the college level and opportunities to cultivate a self-authored worldview commitment going forward.

The pre-college experiences of Catholic students vis-à-vis interfaith interactions and service are closely aligned with their interfaith values and expectations of the college environment. Seventy percent of these individuals expressed a commitment to interfaith leadership and service. Furthermore, their appreciation of interreligious commonalities and differences is uniquely high (77%, compared to 72%), despite the fact that they were less likely than non-Catholic students to have discussed common or divergent values with people of other worldviews before arriving at college. When it comes to engaging across worldview differences, 66% of Catholic IDEALS participants agreed it was important to lead efforts in collaboration with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives to create positive changes in society (compared to 63% of non-Catholics). Even more promising—70%

of all Catholics surveyed expressed openness to adjusting their beliefs as they learn from other people and have new life experiences in college—findings that parallel the proportion of non-Catholics, boding well for interfaith engagement and pluralism development in the years ahead.

REFERENCES

Pew Research Center (PRC). (2015). America's changing religious landscape. Retrieved from <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>

