

# Incoming Jewish Students

The history of Jewish students in United States higher education contains challenging instances of exclusion, including the use of quotas to restrict Jewish admissions to elite institutions in the 20th century (see Zimmerman, 2017). Today, Jews continue to report notable levels of implicit anti-Semitism and feelings of unease (e.g., Kosmin & Keysar, 2015; Weinberg, 2012), punctuated by a recent wave of overt anti-Semitic attacks on college campuses (e.g., Blumberg, 2016; Keith & Schapiro, 2016). While Jews today are able to access postsecondary education at levels that may have eluded previous generations, Jewish students can come to feel marginalized by campus cultures that still do not view them as equal members of the campus community and instead introduce personal and structural (e.g., not being allowed class time of for fasting on Yom Kippur, lack of access to Kosher dining options) challenges.

Informed by earlier research in which informal engagement with diverse peers, space on campus for support and spiritual expression, and provocative experiences with worldview diversity proved to play a critical role in positively shaping non-Jewish students' attitudes toward their Jewish peers (Mayhew, Bowman, Rockenbach, Selznick & Riggers-Piehl, 2015), this report provides insight into the degree to which Jewish students arrive at campus poised to engage with individuals from diverse religions and worldviews. In particular, it affords greater understanding of these students' expectations of their campus concerning worldview diversity, and it offers a snapshot of Jewish students' pre-college experiences with and perceptions of different religious and nonreligious groups.

This report presents findings from data collected from 486 Jewish-identifying, first-semester college students who participated in the initial administration of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). IDEALS, a national study of college students attending 122 institutions across the United States, gauges college students' affinity for interreligious cooperation, their appreciation for various worldview groups, and their religious diversity experiences in higher education institutions. The study also provides insights regarding how students self-identify religiously, spiritually, and politically.

## DEMOGRAPHIC DISTINCTIONS

Overwhelmingly, Jewish IDEALS respondents identified as White (88%, compared to 60% of other students). More so than other entering students, Jewish IDEALS respondents also leaned toward liberal political ideology. Nearly 60% (58%) identified as "liberal" or "very liberal," compared to 39% of non-Jewish first-term students. Additionally, these students are distinct in terms of their family context. First-term Jewish students more commonly said that they grew up in a multifaith family (29%, compared to 19% of non-Jewish students). The majority also came from well-educated families; nearly 90% said they had at least one parent with a college degree, compared to 65% of non-Jewish students. Likely reflective of the education level of their parent(s), incoming Jewish students also tended to come from higher-income families. One-third said their family's income was between \$100,000 and \$199,999. Another 34% reported a family income of at least \$200,000.

## PERCEPTION OF SELF RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Similar to their non-Jewish peers, more than half of incoming Jewish students identified as “spiritual” in some capacity: 35% described themselves as “both religious and spiritual,” and 24% identified as “spiritual, but not religious.” Jewish students also paralleled other students in the proportion that described themselves as “neither spiritual nor religious” (20%, compared to 22% of non-Jewish students). Setting first-term Jews apart from other incoming students, however, was the prevalence of religion as a self-defining feature. In contrast to only 11% of other students who said the same, 21% of Jewish IDEALS respondents said they were “religious, but not spiritual.”

## FACTORS INFORMING WORLDVIEW DEVELOPMENT AND INTERACTIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Whereas the majority of incoming Jewish students described themselves as “religious” in some way, a large proportion of first-term Jews (61%) indicated that their worldview was unrelated to their religious beliefs/faith. For the worldview of these students, family was most important, with 46% of respondents saying that “family background and traditions” had the most influence on their worldview (compared to 36% of non-Jewish respondents).

Despite the seeming disconnect between religion’s role in the identity and worldview development of Jewish IDEALS respondents, these students were distinctly engaged with their religious traditions. Nearly 9 in 10 first-term Jewish students (87%) said they attended a religious service within their tradition in the year before college (compared to 65% of non-Jewish incoming students).

## INTERACTIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Jewish students arriving on campus were uniquely familiar with a variety of connections across difference. Distinguishing them from their non-Jewish peers, the majority of Jewish first-year IDEALS students said they had traveled outside the country before arriving on campus (61%, compared to 43%). These students had also spoken with others who have different perspectives prior to college. Nearly 40% of first-term Jewish students had done so via an interfaith dialogue (36%). Over three-fourths had conversations with individuals of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives about the values they share (76%) and the values among them that differ (76%). Friends and family were also a part of those pre-college exchanges for Jewish IDEALS respondents. Seventy-eight percent said they had discussions about religious diversity with friends or family within the past year.

First-term Jewish students also reported markedly high levels of activity-based interaction with people of different perspectives, such as sharing a meal (92%), studying (79%), or socializing (95%) across different religious or nonreligious worldviews. In terms of experiences with school environments, most Jewish first-years entered college having spoken about their worldview in class (64%). Paralleling patterns seen with non-Jewish IDEALS respondents, large proportions of first-term Jewish students had also discussed religious or spiritual topics with their high school teachers (54%) and in at least one of their high school courses (64%).

## EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE

Jewish students had particularly high expectations of their institutions when it came to providing welcoming environments for people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This aspect of campus climate was a priority for all IDEALS respondents. However, a greater proportion of incoming Jewish students said that it was “important” or “very important” that their campus provide a welcoming environment for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (84%, compared to 77%). Analogous to the total IDEALS sample, Jewish students respondents also indicated that a welcoming campus environment was “important” or “very important” for different religious and nonreligious perspectives (89%) and for diverse racial backgrounds (89%).

## APPRECIATION ACROSS DIFFERENCE AND PLURALISM ORIENTATION

While religious diversity was a feature of IDEALS participants’ friend groups in general, incoming Jewish students more commonly reported having friends with differing perspectives.

Over two-thirds of Jewish IDEALS respondents (67%) indicated that they had five or more close friends with different religious and nonreligious perspectives, compared to 43% of non-Jewish students. Less than 5% of incoming Jewish students said they had no friends of divergent perspectives.

Likely related to the worldview diversity present in their friend groups, Jewish first-term students expressed markedly positive attitudes towards various religious and nonreligious groups. In particular, a larger proportion of Jewish IDEALS respondents ranked “high” in the appreciative attitudes that they hold toward Buddhists (70%, compared to 54% of non-Jews). Similar patterns were seen in the percentage of first-term Jewish students with highly appreciative attitudes toward Hindus (61%, compared to 46%); Muslims (55%, compared to 43%); political liberals (69%, compared to 52%); political conservatives (44%, compared to 41%); gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (68%, compared to 51%), and transgender people (63%, compared to 46%).

Evangelical Christians emerged as one group for which the attitudes of Jewish IDEALS respondents were decidedly less positive. Forty-four percent of incoming Jewish students were measured as having highly appreciative attitudes toward evangelical Christians; yet, 52% of non-Jewish students had high levels of appreciation for that group. Perhaps reflecting this gap to some degree, first-term Jewish students were also less apt to correctly answer a question on the religious tradition of evangelical Christians.

Finally, Jewish students began college more oriented towards pluralism than other IDEALS respondents. Pluralism—a factor reflecting “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 the world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with diverse others and still hold to their own worldviews” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 2)—was manifested on some level by almost all students who participated in IDEALS. Jewish first-term students, however, were notably high scorers on the scale. Three-quarters of them ranked as highly oriented toward pluralism, in comparison to 65% of other students.



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