

Executive Summary

IDEALS: Bridging Religious Divides through Higher Education

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The United States is undergoing massive demographic changes—including rapid growth in religious diversity—that are shaping ideological divides and political polarization across the nation. The recent Covid-19 crisis is shedding new light on our fractured civic landscape and will undoubtedly exacerbate the challenges we face. As we move forward, it will be more important than ever to engage worldview¹ differences effectively. The ability to bridge religious divides will be critical for the next generation of leaders in their civic and professional lives. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to help young Americans develop the skills and knowledge they need to successfully navigate new religious realities.

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) explores a fundamental question: To what extent is the collegiate experience preparing students to be successful leaders in our religiously diverse society?

Methodology

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is the most comprehensive examination of religious diversity in higher education to date, examining student perceptions of—and engagement with—religious diversity throughout their college careers.

This multi-million-dollar study followed a nationally representative sample of students over four years of college. They were enrolled at 122 diverse campuses, including liberal arts colleges, religiously affiliated institutions, and a variety of public universities. IDEALS was led by Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach at North Carolina State University, an expert in religious and worldview diversity issues in higher education, Dr. Matthew J. Mayhew at The Ohio State University, an expert on college and its influence on student learning and democratic outcomes, and Interfaith Youth Core, a national non-profit that partners with higher education to advance interfaith cooperation.

¹ Worldview describes a person's religious, spiritual, or nonreligious outlook on life.



Findings

IDEALS revealed five key findings that illuminate how college is preparing students for a religiously diverse society:

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

College students generally value bridging religious divides. By the end of their fourth year in college, 70% of students were highly committed to doing so. Ninety-six percent of students agreed at least somewhat when asked if they respect people who have religious or nonreligious perspectives that differ from their own.

Despite an overarching belief in the importance of bridging divides, many students do not feel they have the skills to do so. Only 32% of students answered affirmatively when asked if they developed a deeper skill-set to interact with people of diverse beliefs while in college. Among specific worldview groups, Muslims were most likely to say that their skill-set improved (44%), while Buddhists were the least likely to say the same (22%).

Tellingly, many students do not participate in programs and activities that build interfaith skills. For example, only 26% of students enrolled in a course designed to enhance knowledge about religious diversity during college. A mere 14% participated in an interfaith dialogue on campus. These and other findings suggest that higher education leaders should do more to encourage greater student participation in opportunities that help them learn to bridge religious divides. This could involve increasing the number of interfaith opportunities available in and out of the classroom, as well as promoting existing offerings more widely.

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

Interfaith friendships flourish on college campuses: 93% of students reported having at least one friend with a worldview different than their own. Almost half of students had five or more friends of other faith traditions.

However, students do not frequently wrestle with differences of belief in the context of these friendships. Fifty-nine percent of fourth-year college students reported never having a disagreement with friends about religion. Interestingly, students were more likely to have disagreements with friends about politics (71% indicated doing so). In both cases, students who had disagreements largely maintained their friendships after those disputes.

Students may also be hesitant to broach contentious topics in general, with 59% of students claiming they stayed quiet at least occasionally during challenging conversations. Notably, 63% of students believed that—on their campus—people tended to interact primarily with others who shared their beliefs, limiting opportunities for disagreement altogether. In light of these findings, higher education leaders can and should do more to equip students with the tools to successfully navigate discussions about religious differences.

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

Students are more open to participating in activities that engage religious differences when they feel safe and supported. Unfortunately, many students do not experience their campus environments positively in this regard. Jewish students, for example, were the least likely among their peers to perceive their campus as welcoming. Only 27% of Jewish students in their final year agreed that their college or university was receptive to religious diversity. Several other religious minority groups expressed similar views: only 37% of Buddhists and 38% of Hindus agreed their campuses were welcoming of religious diversity. Interestingly, 58% of Muslim students agreed that their campuses welcomed diverse religious groups—despite hearing or reading insensitive comments about their religion more often than their peers.

With respect to space and support to express one's worldview on campus, student comfort levels vary by worldview. Atheists overwhelmingly felt safe expressing their worldview on campus (84%). A vast majority of mainline Protestants (83%), evangelicals (83%), Jews (84%), Catholics (85%), and Latter-day Saints (89%) felt there was a place on campus to express their worldview. Meanwhile, members of religious minority groups that are often underrepresented on campus (i.e., groups other than Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims) consistently responded less favorably than their peers when asked if their campus offered space and support for religious expression.

Taken together, these findings suggest that higher education leaders must take steps to ensure students of all worldview identities are equitably supported on campus, especially those from minority religious traditions.

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

A majority of students spend time in college learning about people of different races and ethnicities, countries, political affiliations, sexual orientations, and gender identities, but fewer spend time learning about people of different worldviews. For example, about three-quarters of students agreed that they have dedicated time to learning about people of a different race or ethnicity and people from other countries. In contrast, only 46% have dedicated time to learn about Muslims, and even fewer have sought to learn about atheists, Buddhists, evangelical Christians, Hindus, Jews, or Latter-day Saints.

Unsurprisingly, college students did not demonstrate strong knowledge of different religions when answering a series of religious literacy questions as part of IDEALS: nearly three-quarters of students in their fourth year earned the equivalent of a "C" grade or below.

All told, students' religious literacy improved over the course of their college experience, but there is still room for growth. Higher education leaders should identify additional opportunities to educate students about the diversity of religious and nonreligious traditions represented across our nation today.

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

In addition to examining religious diversity, IDEALS explores how students feel about people with different social identities and political orientations. From 2015-2016, first-year students generally developed more positive attitudes toward people across the political spectrum. After that, attitudes toward liberals and conservatives began to diverge.

Overall, positive feelings toward politically liberal people increased during college among students in the study. By contrast, positive feelings toward politically conservative people leveled off or declined after the first college year, varying slightly by worldview group. Notably, some of the groups with the greatest appreciation for conservatives at the end of their first year showed the sharpest declines thereafter, including Hindus and Latter-day Saints.

IDEALS findings about attitudes toward political conservatives, particularly during a period of deep polarization nationally, underscore that higher education leaders must take additional steps to help students bridge political divides alongside religious differences.

Conclusion

In an increasingly polarized world, it is crucial that students emerge from higher education equipped with the knowledge and skills to bridge religious divides. IDEALS offers a data-driven path forward for leaders and educators in higher education who are ready to improve the scope and impact of interfaith engagement in college. While some are taking steps to facilitate change, there is more work to be done. The stakes—for the students themselves and for the country as a whole—could not be higher.

For more information about this research or to access the full report, visit ifyc.org/navigating-religious-diversity.

