

Incoming Muslim Students

Islamophobia has escalated across the U.S., and it is that social climate within which today's entering college students spent their formative years. Given such a contentious climate around Islam, how do Muslim young adults perceive religious diversity in the United States? Even more, how do they engage with religious diversity? With those questions in mind, this report focuses on Muslim students' perceptions of and experiences with religious and worldview diversity upon entering college.

In fall 2015, 379 first-year college students identifying as Muslim took part 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. While some first-year Muslim students in the study identified as "religious" in some capacity, the majority (56%) described themselves as "both religious and spiritual." Muslim IDEALS respondents also did not identify as politically conservative. Half identified as politically "moderate," and another 40% identified as "liberal" or "very liberal" (out of five categories that included very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, and very conservative). The Muslim students surveyed were predominantly people of color (80%), with the majority (42%) identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander. Other racial identities included White (20%), African American/Black (10%), Multiracial (12%), and Latino (less than 1%). Sixteen percent of Muslim participants designated that they identify with a race other than those listed. Nearly one-quarter of the Muslim IDEALS respondents indicated that they were an international student (22%).

For first-year Muslim college students, religion plays a distinct role in shaping their worldview. When asked to identify the factors that had the most important influence on their worldview, 74% of Muslim IDEALS respondents ranked "religious beliefs/faith" as one of the top three influencers. 42% of the incoming Muslim students said that "religious beliefs/faith" was the element that shaped their worldview the most. Muslim students also stood out in terms of their level of pre-college involvement in religious communities. A majority of first-year Muslim college students (81%) had attended religious services within their tradition in the year before college.

PRE-COLLEGE ENGAGEMENT

First-year Muslim students are distinct in regard to their engagement with worldview diversity prior to entering college. Nearly 80% had engaged in conversations with people of diverse religious or nonreligious perspectives about the values they have in common, and 76% had engaged in conversations about differing values with people of diverse religious/nonreligious perspectives. In terms of experiences with peers, these students had also shared a meal (86%) or socialized (88%) with someone of a different worldview before their first term of college, paralleling patterns seen across all first-year students. However, Muslim students appeared to be particularly prone to studying with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective: 81% had done so before starting college.

EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE

Turning to what they expected in terms of diversity within the college environment, Muslim students hold high expectations for inclusiveness on their campus. Especially high numbers of Muslim respondents indicated it is “important” or “very important” that the campus environment be a welcoming environment for people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives (95%) and people of diverse racial identities (96%). These uniquely high expectations were mirrored in the learning opportunities that first-year Muslim students expected to find while in college. Specifically, Muslim students believed that institutions should provide opportunities to get to know students of different worldviews (80%) and to participate in community service with students of other worldviews (79%).

FRIENDSHIPS OUTSIDE OF ISLAM

Perhaps due in part to their status as a religious minority group, Muslim first-year college students are unique in the number of friends that they have outside of their religion. Close to three-quarters of incoming Muslims said that they had five or more friends with different religious/nonreligious perspectives (70%). Only 4% said that they did not have any non-Muslim friends. For most Muslim first-years, however, these diverse friends appeared to be distinctly clustered within only a few worldviews. For example, fewer than half of Muslim IDEALS respondents indicated that they had at least one close friend who is atheist (49%), and only 10% said that they have at least one friend who is a Latter-day Saint/Mormon. In contrast, Muslim students stood out as more commonly having at least one close friend who is Hindu (52%) and at least one who is multifaith (21%).

PLURALISM ORIENTATION

Incoming Muslim students are also distinct in the interfaith attitudes and values that they hold. A large proportion of Muslim IDEALS respondents (60%) scored “high” on the measure “Global Citizenship,” reflecting their engagement with a global society through both action and reflection on global issues. Similarly, these students (90%) were commonly “high” scorers on the “Goodwill/Acceptance” scale, revealing that most incoming Muslim undergraduates had positive attitudes toward people whose worldview differs from theirs and that they believe cultivating interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place. They are also highly committed to interfaith leadership and service (85% scored “high”). Collectively, these data indicate that while the current climate for Muslims in the U.S. may be chilly, Muslim students are entering college primed to participate in and cultivate interreligious understanding.

