

Religious and Non-Religious Accommodations in Higher Education

One of the essential elements of designing a campus environment welcoming to people of different religious and nonreligious identities is creating accommodating spaces—both physical spaces (like facilities) and psychological spaces (like a culture of welcome, inclusion, and support for expression). This is especially important given the religious and secular diversity of students on campus. Approximately 43 percent of American college students are either in the religious minority (religious, but not Christian) or non-religious (atheist, agnostic, no affiliation, etc.). These students report feeling much less supported in their spiritual expression than students in the religious majority.

Creating accommodating spaces is not only important in welcoming religious diversity on campus—it can also help you build pluralism. Recent data show that students who feel accommodated on campus are more likely to report higher positive attitudes toward pluralism than those who feel less supported.³ The following resource is a primer on creating welcoming spaces on both small and large scales. We will examine **facilities, dietary needs, scheduling accommodations, staff development, and means to communicate campus policies.**

Facilities

Reflection, meditation, and prayer rooms are often a first step many institutions take to accommodate religious observance. How you establish and name the space depends on your institutional context but the sentiment is the same: students will feel supported in their religious expression if these places are visible, well known, and easy to find. They represent a clear public commitment to supporting the personal development of students.

Example: Union College, Schenectady, NY

[The prayer and meditation room](#)

On a larger scale, some institutions have established campus interfaith centers. These spaces are usually multiple rooms and sometimes entire buildings. Dedicated interfaith centers indicate a high priority for interfaith engagement on campus and provide a public and widely-known space for students, staff, and faculty of all religious and secular affiliations. Because an interfaith center requires substantial institutional support to design, build, staff, and maintain, it is usually a longer term project. Nonetheless, such a space positions the campus as a welcoming place for religiously diverse students.

Example: Utah Valley University, Orem, UT

[Reflection Center](#)

In addition to spaces for religious observance, it is important to incorporate accommodation for religious needs in student living spaces as well. For example, many Jewish students observing Shabbat on Saturdays

refrain from using electricity and therefore avoid taking elevators or using electronic keys. Strategies to welcome those students include honoring requests to live on lower floors and to access residence halls with manual keys. Also consider offering alternate, non-Saturday move-in and move-out days, as carrying items from place to place is prohibited on Shabbat.

Many religious groups are also careful to prevent gender mixing. Campuses can respect this need by providing single gender floors or separate residence halls, as well as single gender hours at university gyms and pools.

Dietary Accommodations

Students have many different dietary practices based on religious and ethical commitments. For example, many Jews only eat certified [kosher](#) food, many Muslims eat only [halal](#) meat, and many Hindus are strict vegetarians. Accommodating such a wide variety of dietary restrictions (in addition to allergies and intolerances) is challenging, but many campuses are committed to providing options both on and off campus.

Example: Northwestern University, Chicago, IL
[Kosher, Halal, and Vegetarian Dining](#)

Another way to make dining on campus more welcoming is to ensure that dining hall hours are friendly to diverse religious practices. Consider special late hours for at least one on-campus dining hall, so that students observing Ramadan or other religious fasts are able to eat after the fast ends (typically after sundown).

These kinds of changes will require the support and efforts of university dining services and other stakeholders. As a first step, research various eating establishments around campus that may be able to provide options for your students until university dining options are widely available. Once collected, make sure this information is easily accessible to students by including it on the dining services or student affairs homepage for your institution.

Scheduling Accommodations

Students of different religious and non-religious backgrounds celebrate many different holidays, and often need to arrange their schedule to allow for full observance. However, students in the religious minority often feel like their holidays are not accommodated⁴ to the extent those of the majority are, as the academic calendar is typically organized around Christian holidays. One way to help ensure that students are able to fully observe their religious or secular holidays (while maintaining their academic and campus participation) is to create campus scheduling policies. While it is impossible to accommodate every holiday of every worldview, it is helpful to communicate major holidays to professors and other staff so they can avoid scheduling major assignments or events on those dates and to create a consistent policy for accommodating missed work on other days of observance.

Example: Colgate University, Hamilton, NY
[Religious Holiday Policy](#)

Staffing

Many students come to campus with a desire to maintain their religious practice after having left their religious community for the first time. Many other students are exploring their beliefs or have come to believe new concepts. Whatever their belief status, students can benefit immensely from the support of chaplains during the college years, especially a chaplain of their own religious or secular tradition. However, many nonreligious



and religious minority students do not feel that there is a place on campus for them to seek help with their spiritual or religious development compared to students in the religious majority.⁵

One campus that does provide support to students of diverse religious and secular traditions is Harvard University and their [Humanist Hub](#). The Humanist Hub employs Humanist chaplains and staff to support students as they evolve as human beings, connect with other people, and act to make the world a better place.⁶ Humanist (or atheist, agnostic, and other types of secular worldviews) students often do not have a dedicated campus Humanist chaplain, making Harvard a pioneering leader in this type of student support.

Example: Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

[Harvard Chaplaincy](#)

On a smaller scale, existing religious life staff can welcome students of diverse beliefs by clearly communicating that they are available to support students of all identities, not just the tradition through which they are affiliated with or ordained. Other helpful avenues of support for students are off-campus affiliate organizations like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or Hillel. Build relationships with, and publicize the off-campus religious life organizations. Your support and recognition of these organizations can go a long way in helping students feel welcome and supported.

Communicating Expectations

With many different responsibilities and limited staff time, it is easy to forget about the importance of accommodating community policies until a campus crisis puts it on the radar. There are a few proactive steps to take to avoid some crises and lessen the effects of others.

Communicating expectations for how students interact with one another in regard to religious difference is a good way to solidify your welcoming culture. Some campuses establish [community agreements](#) and/or expectations for students and staff. These expectations allow for more open expression of beliefs, with the clear understanding that interchanges should be respectful and cause no harm. Many campuses include religious or non-religious expression under their bias reporting protocols, with teams of campus professionals trained to respond to instances of bias when they are reported.

Example: Furman University, Greenville, SC

[Furman University Ministry Guidelines](#)

Policies regarding religious observance, facility and dietary accommodations, and spiritual support all contribute to a responsive environment, but only if widely known and clearly communicated. The most important places to communicate campus accommodations are the student handbook and the university website. In addition, encourage campus professionals to provide students with information during orientation programs, in residence halls, and on course syllabi.

Example: University of Massachusetts, Amherst

[University Policies Relating to Religious Observance, Harassment, and Discrimination](#)

On an interpersonal level, creating accommodation for different forms of religious and spiritual expression requires literacy-building among students and professionals in general. Building literacy is invaluable in establishing an atmosphere of diversity and respect from the outset. Consider working literacy-building events into your programming. Speak with members of the Religious Studies faculty or staff in the Office of Religious Life to help you determine what information is most valuable to provide students with an understanding of different religious observances.

Next Steps

Creating spaces can take many forms, and depends largely on understanding your campus' most pressing needs. Begin by collecting information from students about their needs for observance. Student surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews can help you focus your efforts. Building a campus culture where all students feel welcome and supported in the expression of their religious, spiritual, and secular identities is complex, but incredibly valuable to the health of your campus community.

Please email info@ifyc.org for more information on religious accommodation practices and interfaith cooperation. For more examples of accommodating practices and policies, check out our [policies compilation](#).

