The Interfaith Expectations and Attitudes of First-Year Students: Insights for Fostering a More Pluralistic Campus Climate

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Bolstered by research highlighting the role that diversity engagement plays in critical developmental outcomes, equity and inclusion are championed as fundamental to the work of higher education. Even so, religious identity and worldview remain underemphasized in the diversity and inclusion efforts of most colleges and universities.

This document outlines findings from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) that can inform practice for engaging religious and worldview diversity in higher education. Within these data are nuanced stories of incoming students’ expectations of their collegiate experience; varied attitudes toward peers of differing religious, ideological, and demographic backgrounds; and insights for campuses seeking to begin or enhance interfaith engagement.

### Terms

**Worldview** – A guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, a nonreligious perspective, ideological views, aspects of one’s cultural background and personal identity, or some combination of these

**Worldview Majority** – Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or other Christians

**Worldview Minority** – Formal traditions that are a minority in the U.S. (e.g., Baha’i, Judaism, Paganism, Native American traditions, etc.)

**Non-Religious** – Agnostic, atheist, non-religious, “none,” or Secular Humanist

**Another Worldview** – Write-in identities that span worldview categories or cannot be categorized

**Pluralism Orientation** – 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 world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with diverse others and still hold to their own worldviews

**Appreciative Attitudes** – The extent to which students hold positive views of atheists, Evangelical Christians, Jews, Latter-day Saints, and Muslims

### IDEALS Sample

122 Participating institutions in the United States
20,436 first-term students

**Participants by institution**
- 41% from Public Institutions
- 23% from Private – Nonsectarian Institutions
- 21% from Protestant Institutions
- 8% from Catholic Institutions
- 7% from Evangelical Protestant Institutions

**Participants by worldview identification**
- 55% Worldview Majority
- 28% Nonreligious
- 15% Worldview Minority
- 2% Another Worldview

**Participants by gender**
- 65% Female
- 34% Male
- 1% Another Gender Identity

**Participants by race**
- 60% White
- 13% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 10% Multiracial
- 8% Latino
- 7% African American/Black
- 1% Another Race
- <1% Native American

**Participants by sexual orientation**
- 89% Heterosexual
- 5% Bisexual
- 3% Another Sexual Orientation
- 1% Gay
- 1% Lesbian
- 1% Queer

**Participants by political leaning**
- 3% Very Conservative
- 17% Conservative
- 41% Moderate
- 28% Liberal
- 11% Very Liberal
General Findings

IDEALS will track a cohort of students for four years of their collegiate career. In fall 2015, the first of three surveys was administered to incoming, first-year students. Results point to four high-level findings that can inform practices for first-year experiences.

- Entering students have high expectations that institutions provide welcoming campus environments.
  - Most students say it is important for campuses to provide welcoming environments for racial diversity (89%), worldview diversity (85%), and sexual orientation/gender identity (77%).
- Incoming college students are poised for interfaith engagement.
  - The majority of first-term students agreed with the following statements: “We can overcome many of the world’s major problems if people of different religious and nonreligious perspectives work together” (83%); “It is important to serve with those of diverse religious backgrounds on issues of common concern” (79%); “My worldview inspires me to serve with others on issues of common concern” (78%); and “I am committed to leading efforts in collaboration with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives to create positive changes in society” (63%).
- Fewer students reported participation in interfaith engagement before college.
  - Half worked with people of other worldviews on service projects in the year before college. Thirty-five percent attended religious services for traditions other than their own. Nineteen percent participated in interfaith dialogue, and 18% attended an interfaith prayer vigil or memorial.
- Appreciative attitudes toward specific worldview populations vary.
  - More than half of incoming students reported having highly favorable attitudes toward people of a race different than their own (70%), people from a country different than their own (68%), Buddhists (55%), Jews (53%), politically liberal people (53%), Evangelical Christians (52%), and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (52%).
  - Less than half of first-term students reported highly appreciative attitudes toward atheists (47%), Hindus (46%), transgender people (46%), Muslims (43%), politically conservative people (41%), and Mormons (39%).

Appreciative Attitudes by Institution Type

When looking at appreciative attitudes toward certain groups, percentages of students who have highly appreciative attitude differed by institution type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of students with high appreciative attitudes toward...</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheists</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evangelical Christian</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDS/ Mormoms</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politically Conservative People</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politically Liberal People</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gay/ Lesbian/ Bisexual people</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgender people</td>
<td>52%</td>
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<tr>
<td>People of a race different than their own</td>
<td>72%</td>
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<tr>
<td>People of a country different than their own</td>
<td>73%</td>
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