

# Incoming Atheist Students

In recent years, there has been a 94% increase in the number of U.S. adults who identify as atheist (see, for example, Lipka, 2016). Similarly, college students report being more secular (Eagan et al., 2016), a categorical distinction that includes atheist students. Even so, atheists remain a minority in postsecondary contexts, necessitating greater understanding of this particular student group. Specifically, who are the students that claim an atheist identity, and how do they engage with religious diversity? With those questions in mind, this report focuses on atheist students' perceptions of and experiences with religious and worldview diversity upon entering college.

In fall 2015, 1,518 first-year college students identifying as atheist 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.

Demographic patterns of the atheist IDEALS respondents distinguish them from incoming first-year students of other worldviews. For example, 46% of atheist IDEALS respondents identified as male, compared to 33% of non-atheist IDEALS respondents. Additionally, a higher percentage of incoming atheist first-year students identified as "another gender identity" (2%), and a larger share of atheist first-year respondents reported having a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity (23%) than other students. Predominantly, atheist students described themselves White (66%) or Asian/Pacific Islander (15%); however, participants also racially identified as Latino (7%), African American/Black (2%), Native American (less than 1%), and a race other than listed (1%).

## FACTORS INFORMING WORLDVIEW DEVELOPMENT

Incoming atheist students reported many non-religious pre-college factors that shaped their worldviews. When asked to indicate the top three influences, just 4% of incoming atheist students indicated that "religious beliefs/faith" had some influence on that part of their life (compared to 52% of non-atheists). For these students, "nonreligious beliefs/perspectives," "family/background and traditions," and "political views" were more influential. Compared to 26% of non-atheists, 54% of atheist IDEALS respondents ranked "nonreligious beliefs/perspectives" as one of their top three worldview influencers. Half also said that their worldview was informed by "family background and traditions," an interesting pattern given the prevalence of multifaith family backgrounds for atheist IDEALS respondents (30% said they grew up in a multifaith family). Additionally, 45% of atheist first-years students said political views played a key role in shaping their worldview (compared to 24% of non-atheists).

Perhaps reflective of the host of religious and spiritual perspectives prevalent in U.S. society, atheists arrived at college having put a lot of thought into their worldview identity. Over two-thirds (67%) of atheist respondents said they thoughtfully considered other religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their worldview. Similarly, 63% of atheist respondents reported having integrated multiple points of view into their existing worldview before committing to it, and 34% said they had reconciled competing religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their worldview.

## PRE-COLLEGE INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Atheist IDEALS respondents were distinctive in terms of their pre-college engagement with people of diverse backgrounds. While 67% of non-atheist first-year students reported having conversations with people of diverse religious or nonreligious perspectives about values they held in common, 71% of atheists entered college having done so. Similarly, a higher percentage of incoming atheists had conversations with people about differing values (71%, compared to 64% of non-atheists), and they more commonly reported having discussed religious diversity with family and friends (72%, compared to 68% of non-atheists).

Pre-college interfaith engagement for incoming atheist students was not limited to conversations about religious diversity. While atheist respondents were less likely than other students to attend an interfaith prayer vigil/memorial (10%, compared to 19% of non-atheists) or participate in community service before college (79%, compared to 86% of non-atheists), they were more likely to attend a service for a religious tradition outside of their own (41%, compared to 35% of non-atheists) or engage socially and academically with people of other worldviews. Nearly all the incoming atheist students (91%) indicated they had socialized with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective in the year before college (compared to 87% of non-atheists). Eighty-six percent indicated they had shared a meal with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective during that timeframe (compared to 80% of non-atheists), and nearly three out of four (74%) said they had studied with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective (compared to 65% of non-atheists).

## PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS, GENDER, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Approximately three-quarters (71%) of atheist IDEALS respondents indicated that they are “liberal” or “very liberal” politically, compared to 37% of other students. In addition, first-year atheists also thought highly of politically liberal people, with 73% being more likely to agree with statements like: “people in this group make positive contributions to society,” “individuals in this group are ethical people,” “I have things in common with people in this group,” and “in general, I have a positive attitude toward people in this group.” At the same time, only one quarter of incoming atheist students expressed similar attitudes toward politically conservative people.

Similar to the association between their personal political views and their affinity for particular political identities, atheist respondents also expressed more positive attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people than did other students. For example, 86% of atheists indicated that they have a generally positive attitude toward lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, compared to 72% of other students. Additionally, atheists entered college with distinctly favorable attitudes toward transgender people. Compared to 67% of non-atheists, 81% of atheist respondents said they have a generally positive attitude toward transgender people. Further reinforcing the openness that atheist first-year students have toward various sexual and gender identities, 88% of incoming atheist students said that it is “important” or “very important” for their campus to be a welcoming environment for people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (compared to 76% of non-atheists).

## FRIENDSHIPS WITH AND ATTITUDES TOWARD OTHER GROUPS

Atheist first-year college students were distinctive in how important religious diversity was in the composition of their friend groups. A large percentage of atheist incoming students reported having at least one friend who is atheist (88%), but high proportions of atheist students also entered college with friends outside of their own worldview identity. More so than non-atheists, atheists reported having at least one friend who is of a racial background different than theirs (81%, compared to 75% of non-atheists), a different sexual orientation (74%,

compared to 60% of non-atheists), or a political ideology different than their own (62%, compared to 57% of non-atheists). Likewise, atheist respondents were more likely than their religious or theistic peers to have at least one friend who is agnostic (68%, compared to 42% of non-atheists), evangelical Christian (61%, compared to 48% of non-atheists), Jewish (48%, compared to 42% of non-atheists), or Buddhist (25%, compared to 20% of non-atheists). Over half of the atheist respondents (55%) said that they have five or more close friends with different religious/nonreligious perspectives; only 47% of other students said the same.

Despite having friends from a range of worldviews, incoming atheist students—like all IDEALS respondents—expressed having different levels of appreciation for worldview groups other than their own. A larger proportion of atheists ranked “high” in the appreciative attitudes that they hold toward Buddhists (69%, compared to 54% of non-atheists). When it came to evangelical Christians and Latter-Day Saints/Mormons, however, atheist respondents reported lower levels of appreciation than other students. Only 31% of atheist respondents held highly appreciative attitudes toward Mormons (compared to 40% of non-atheist students), and only 29% of atheist first-year students were highly appreciative of evangelicals (compared to 54% of non-atheist students).

Similar disparities appeared in the perceptions that atheist first-year students had of commonalities and differences among religions. IDEALS respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with the following statements: “world religions share many common values,” “there are essential differences in beliefs that distinguish world religions,” “there are essential differences in spiritual practices that distinguish world religions,” and “love is a value that is core to most of the world’s religions.” When rated on the corresponding “Appreciation of Interreligious Commonalities and Differences Scale,” 67% of incoming atheist students scored “high,” compared to 74% of non-atheists.

## PLURALISM ORIENTATION

Despite the various ways in which atheist first-year students differ from their non-atheist counterparts, their propensity for pluralism parallels that of incoming students generally. The pluralism orientation scale defines pluralism as “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). Comparable to non-atheists, 67% of incoming atheist students scored “high” and 33% scored “medium” on the scale. Collectively, these data indicate that while incoming atheist students are distinct from their religious and theistic peers in multiple ways, they are, in terms of pluralism, equally primed for engagement across worldview difference.

## REFERENCES

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Recommended Citation:

Crandall, R. E., Snipes, J. T., Wu, M., Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., & Associates. (2017). *IDEALS Narratives: Incoming Atheist Students*. Chicago, IL: Interfaith Youth Core.