



## Redefining Interfaith Engagement: A Case Study of One Evangelical Institution

Matthew J. Mayhew, Musbah Shaheen & B. Ashley Staples

To cite this article: Matthew J. Mayhew, Musbah Shaheen & B. Ashley Staples (2022): Redefining Interfaith Engagement: A Case Study of One Evangelical Institution, Christian Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/15363759.2022.2142989](https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2022.2142989)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2022.2142989>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor and Francis Group, LLC



Published online: 18 Nov 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 392



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Redefining Interfaith Engagement: A Case Study of One Evangelical Institution

Matthew J. Mayhew , Musbah Shaheen , and B. Ashley Staples 

The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

### ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from an exemplary case that highlighted some opportunities and challenges one evangelical institution faced when trying to promote interfaith learning and development in its students, despite the absence of formal interfaith practices on campus. The case study, which included an evangelical institution with little to no formal interfaith practice, was conducted as part of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), a mixed-methods project designed to capture information on the collegiate conditions and educational practices that spur interfaith learning and development. The university was identified as exemplary in that its students empirically demonstrated interfaith learning gains during their first year in college. Results center the importance of the classroom for its role in building the type of trust that allows students to struggle religiously and spiritually. Recommendations for considering interfaith work at evangelical institutions are provided. Among these recommendations are to locate and institutionalize interfaith practices within articulations and expressions of the institutional mission, logic, framework, and language and improve practices that help students develop interfaith sensibilities.

### KEYWORDS

Evangelical; interfaith; exemplary case study

Evangelical institutions offer a distinctive approach to higher education delivery that is often accompanied—and sometimes complicated—by articulated statements of faith intended to connect community members to explicit values held by the institution; messaging challenges concerning the roles all forms of diversity play in its culture and climate fabrics; and the mechanisms needed to create learning experiences that prioritize working effectively and productively with all members of society without compromising tenets and expressions of the Christian faith (see Mayhew, 2012). Thus, evangelical college students are faced with distinctive learning challenges and opportunities, often cumbersome to navigate, let alone explain.

One such difficulty comes in the form of interfaith learning and the experiences theorized as catalysts for its development. Researchers have documented that students from all religious, secular, and spiritual worldviews—including those who identify as

**CONTACT** Matthew J. Mayhew  [mayhew.65@osu.edu](mailto:mayhew.65@osu.edu)  Higher Education and Student Affairs, The Ohio State University, 310 Ramseier Hall, 29 W. Woodruff Ave, Columbus, OH 43201, USA

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor and Francis Group, LLC  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

evangelical—benefit from productive conversations across faith lines (Crandall et al., 2020; Mayhew et al., 2020; Staples et al., 2019) to such a degree that some scholars have suggested that interfaith engagement is necessary for preparing students to become responsible members of an increasingly pluralistic society (Carter et al., 2020; Patel & Meyer, 2009). The challenge that continues to confront scholars and educators involves locating evangelical institutions within the interfaith conversation. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we addressed the research question: How can evangelical institutions more effectively help their students make interfaith learning and developmental gains in the absence of formal interfaith efforts and experiences?

Evangelical institutions often embed language related to interfaith frameworks into their mission statements, albeit not intentionally. For example, Wheaton College (IL) proclaims that it “serves Jesus Christ and advances His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and benefit society worldwide” (Wheaton College, n.d.). In another example, Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) “transforms lives by equipping students to pursue academic excellence, integrate faith with all areas of knowledge, engage a diverse world, and live worthy of the high calling of God in Christ” (OBU Mission Statement; Oklahoma City University, n.d.). “Benefitting society” and “Engag[ing] a diverse world” are just some of the words and phrases evangelical institutions espouse as a means of bringing their respective communities together and visioning their academic directives. Not only do the mission statements of evangelical institutions share language with interfaith work, but they may also share the directives the language represents, such as curricular and co-curricular offerings that center diversity in the context of evangelical postsecondary education.

Despite these shared ideas, the concept of interfaith engagement continues to challenge educators at evangelical institutions (Carter, 2019). Given the lack of structural worldview diversity—meaning the numerical proportion of students, faculty, and staff who identify as non-evangelical at evangelical institutions—these institutions often struggle with enacting formal interfaith practices. This case study was designed to examine an evangelical institution with little to no formal interfaith practices, where students empirically demonstrated interfaith learning and developmental gains during their first year in college.

This case site, Southwest University (SWU; pseudonym), is an evangelical Baptist institution where researchers observed that students exhibited empirical gains in interfaith learning and developmental outcomes such as pluralism, appreciative attitudes, and appreciative knowledge (see Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021). Simultaneously, formal interfaith practices—as coded by researchers—did not seem to occur. The institution was identified as an exemplary case from a mixed-methods, multi-case project called the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS; Rockenbach et al., 2020). A nationally-representative sample of over 7,500 undergraduate students was surveyed at the beginning and the end of their first collegiate year (i.e., from fall 2015 to spring 2016) at 122 institutions of various locations, sizes, and affiliations. Based on the levels of change in empirically-based interfaith learning and development measures across the first year (see Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021), institutions were selected for a three-day case study site visit. SWU was among a group of

institutions that had little to no formal interfaith practices. In relation to other institutions in its comparison group, SWU students exhibited increases in interfaith learning outcomes at least one standard deviation above the mean—leading the researchers to select SWU as an exemplary case among the group of institutions without formal interfaith practices.

This article presents the findings of the case study research conducted at SWU. Our goal is to identify insights from this particular case study site that can guide similar evangelical institutions that wrestle with embracing the learning benefits that accompany interfaith ideas while maintaining an authentic connection to their specific religious mission.

## Literature Review

Before reviewing research relevant to interfaith learning and development in higher education, it is important to define some of the key terms used in this research project. Throughout this case study as well as the larger IDEALS project, we use the term *worldview* to reflect “students’ guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, a spiritual orientation, a non-religious perspective, or some combination of these” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 362). The term *interfaith* represents the coming together of people who orient around religion differently (Rockenbach et al., 2020). *Interfaith environments* are those in which “people encounter one another’s stories, identities, beliefs, values, and practices to such a degree that they come away changed” (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021, p. 3). The changes students report as a result of exposure to and participation in certain campus experiences, whether explicitly interfaith or not, are referred to as *interfaith learning and development*. As noted by Mayhew and Rockenbach (2021), learning and development are distinct, yet overlapping processes: “For development to occur, there must be some knowledge acquired or learning attained either through literacy or relationship” (p. 3). With these concepts in mind, we situate the present study in the current literature by discussing interfaith engagement in higher education in general, and Christian institutions in particular.

The interfaith movement has grown tremendously on college and university campuses in recent years, and with good reason. Higher education institutions have an obligation to prepare graduates to engage with a racially, culturally, and religiously diverse world. To punctuate the importance of interfaith learning and development on college campuses, national organizations, such as the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), have emerged as drivers of the interfaith movement (Rockenbach et al., 2018). IFYC has “developed a method for interfaith engagement that highlights the importance of developing appreciative knowledge, meaningful relationships, and positive attitudes across religious identities, which alleviate prejudice and increase understanding” (Carter et al., 2020, p. 30). Undoubtedly, the ability to communicate productively across faith differences is part of this charge, making interfaith learning and development critical learning outcomes for students in higher education.

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of policy and practices that educators can employ across the curriculum and co-curriculum to promote interfaith learning and development among their students. Emerging literature from various disciplines has

shown that collegiate environments are distinctively poised to foster positive interfaith learning and development and that college students are primed to bridge religious divides while in college (see Rockenbach et al., 2020). Consequently, interfaith work has increasingly become part of higher education's effort to promote social justice and inclusion (Edwards, 2018a; Larson & Shady, 2012; Patel & Meyer, 2011).

Christian higher education shares the responsibility of preparing graduates to engage across differences, including interfaith engagement. However, as Poppinga and colleagues (2019) noted, "Many Christians may remain reluctant to build bridges between different communities and cultivate meaningful ongoing relationships with others, particularly those from different religious traditions" (p. 99). This reluctance may be motivated, at least in part, by the desire to maintain a connection with the religious histories and mission of the institution, often steeped in an "in but not of the world" heuristic in which becoming an evangelical Christian is set above other faith traditions as the ultimate goal of human life and loving thy neighbor is a means toward achieving that goal (see Litfin, 2004). For some in the evangelical line, the idea of interfaith might be off-putting, if not heretical, given that its logics represent all faiths as necessarily equal.

Yet other schools of thought within evangelicalism position interfaith engagement in alignment with the very core of the mission of Christian education (Hammond, 2019; Rine & Guthrie, 2016). Emphasizing the deep connection between the ethos of Christianity and interfaith engagement, Poppinga et al. (2019) declared that "Christians are called to love everyone, not pick and choose whom they treat as neighbor" (p. 99). How can Christian institutions maintain a profound connection to their foundational tenets while opening themselves up for productive engagement with other faiths? Furthermore, how can these institutions facilitate productive interfaith engagement in the absence of those who do not identify as evangelical?

In recent years, several studies have sought to address these important questions. For example, Carter (2019) compared the experiences of religious struggle across institutional types (i.e., evangelical, mainline Protestant, Catholic, other religious, and nonsectarian) and found that the "unique characteristics and experiences before and during college [i.e., academic major, coping behaviors, and political orientation] that are associated with... high levels of religious struggle" (p. 256) influenced students to a greater degree at evangelical institutions compared to students enrolled at other institutions (Carter, 2019). In another example, students at some evangelical institutions have been shown to demonstrate large gains in civic outcomes such as social agency and civic awareness due to discussions of religious differences in college (Armstrong & Kim, 2019). As Armstrong and Kim (2019) noted, "Whereas the frequency of discussing religion positively influenced civic awareness development among students attending Southern Baptist, Catholic, and nonsectarian institutions, students attending Southern Baptist institutions received a much more pronounced benefit of religious discussion" (p. 201). Other important higher education outcomes such as academic self-concept (Armstrong & Kim, 2016), leadership (Moran et al., 2007), and racial identity awareness (Paredes-Collins & Collins, 2011) have also been associated with enrollment at evangelical institutions in comparison with other sectarian colleges and universities. These studies point to the characteristics of evangelical institutions and their distinctive potential

to spur all forms of student learning and development, including those associated with the interfaith movement.

Educators committed to interfaith learning and development have recommended that evangelical campuses interested in interfaith engagement adopt approaches that build on the mission of the institution to demonstrate interfaith engagement as a way of fostering justice, equity, and inclusion (Crandall et al., 2020; Edwards, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). According to Basham and Hughes (2012), interfaith work on Christian campuses requires knowledge of the institution and the ability to articulate the connection between its Christian orientation and interfaith work, develop a “theology of interfaith cooperation” (p. 3), and embed interfaith engagement within the existing institutional programs and structures. Although some evangelical institutions have embraced this charge and the many challenges embedded in its execution, others have not, leaving educators within and beyond evangelical institutions to wonder about the role evangelical colleges play in promoting interfaith learning and development in the lives of their students.

The purpose of this study was to examine one evangelical university that had been identified for its gains in interfaith learning and development among its students, despite its lack of formal interfaith efforts. The results of this study will ideally offer some insight into how evangelical institutions and students can promote and embrace interfaith learning and development on similar campuses elsewhere, even if the institution does not have interfaith efforts formalized through programs, policies, or initiatives.

## **Methodology**

This case study was conducted as part of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), a mixed-methods project designed to capture information on the collegiate conditions and educational practices that spur interfaith learning and development. To provide context for these relationships, we will first provide a review of the Interfaith Learning and Development (ILD) model offered by Mayhew and Rockenbach (2021).

## **Theoretical Context**

The larger IDEALS project and the research presented in this article were guided by Mayhew and Rockenbach’s (2021) Interfaith Learning and Development (ILD) model, a “theory-in-practice” that describes “developmental growth for students in a manner that honors differences in the religious or spiritual narratives they bring to college” (p. 2). Students who demonstrate interfaith learning and development: (a) know about religious and non-religious groups, (b) appreciate religious and non-religious groups, (c) formulate their own religious thinking after thorough exposure to difference, and (d) are able to see commonalities across religious and non-religious perspectives while embracing their differences. The movement toward these learning and developmental gains is associated with exposure to and participation in different contexts within the campus environment where people “encounter one another’s stories, identities, beliefs, values, and practices to such a degree they come away changed” (p. 3). These contexts include: a disciplinary context

(i.e., academic major); a relational context that includes both productive and negative interactions across worldviews; an institutional context that includes organizational behaviors and cultures that reflect efforts to promote worldview differences; and a national context within which colleges function. At the center of the environmental components of the ILD model are the forms of interfaith engagement in which students may participate, including formal and informal opportunities for interfaith engagement across the co-curriculum and the curriculum. This model situates the context for this study, not only by the questions asked, but also by the research design itself.

The case identified for this study was selected based on a series of steps related to the study's research design. First, through criteria established by experts in the field of interfaith development, learning, and practice, we established codes for each U.S. institution in terms of its engagement in formal interfaith efforts, such as providing spaces for prayer, including interfaith conversations in orientation sessions, etc. Institutions received one of three codes: no formal interfaith efforts, at least some formal interfaith efforts, and lots of formal interfaith efforts. We assigned the 122 institutions into these three categories, with 46 identified with no formal interfaith efforts, 25 with at least some interfaith efforts, and 51 with lots of formal interfaith efforts.

Next, we surveyed students enrolled in one of 122 participating colleges with interfaith learning and development measures twice, once during the fall of 2015 and then again in the spring of 2016. From this longitudinal administration, we observed gains in interfaith learning and development such as appreciative knowledge, appreciative attitudes, and pluralism. As an extension of this process, we identified institutions where students exhibited different growth rates from low change to medium change to high change.

Taking these steps together, we were able to identify institutions based on a three-by-three matrix. This process yielded nine categories (i.e., high change/high formal interfaith effort; high change/at least some formal interfaith effort; high change/little to no interfaith effort; medium change/high formal interfaith effort; medium change/at least some formal interfaith effort; medium change/little to no interfaith effort; low change/high formal interfaith effort; low change/at least some formal interfaith effort; and low change/little to no interfaith effort), representing the level of formal interfaith efforts by the degree of change in interfaith learning and development. Eighteen institutions were selected for in-depth examination based on this nine-category solution, geography, institutional type, and willingness to participate.

SWU was an example of one of 26 institutions with no formal interfaith engagement but high levels of positive change in interfaith learning and development reported by students attending that institution. Due to its location geographically in the Southwest and its institutional type (i.e., evangelical), we asked permission to conduct a three-day intensive site visit with the goal of addressing the question: In what ways does SWU foster interfaith learning and development among its students in the near absence of formal interfaith efforts?

### **Case Description**

Southwest University (SWU) is a private, four-year institution located in a small city in the Southwest. In the fall of 2016, at the time of our visit, approximately 1,765

undergraduate students attended SWU, with a student-to-faculty ratio of 12:1. Of the population of students at SWU, 62% self-identified as White, with Hispanic/Latino students comprising the next largest group at 19%, followed by Black or African American students at nine percent.

Carnegie classifies SWU as a Master's College and University (i.e., medium programs), and it is ranked "competitive" according to the 2015 Barron's Selectivity Index. At SWU, there are more than 30 student organizations, including several faith-based groups grounded in some form of Christianity. The institution had no established programs with explicit interfaith purposes and goals. Furthermore, SWU did not have ties with any local or national interfaith organizations. By way of campus or community practice, nothing was observable to explain the gains in interfaith learning and development reported by students.

### ***Methods Approach***

Launched in cooperation with Interfaith Youth Core, IDEALS was a mixed-methods project that followed a sequential explanatory design in which the findings of the survey administered during the first two (i.e., from fall of 2015 to spring of 2016) of three time points informed the process of case study selection and examination (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The qualitative component of the IDEALS project was based on a multiple case study design (Stake, 2006) intended to provide added depth and context to the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The research questions that guided the multiple case study design (Stake, 2006) were: (a) How do students, faculty, and staff experience worldview diversity on campus? (b) What factors helped or hindered institutional efforts to promote worldview diversity and interfaith engagement? (c) In what ways did members of distinct campus communities engage in interfaith work?

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Previous publications associated with IDEALS (see Mayhew et al., 2020; Rockenbach et al., 2020) have provided a full description of the particularities of the survey design, collection, and analysis. For the purposes of this article, we present the process of data collection and analysis that led to the results reported in the sections that follow.

This case study research project was conducted over three days. Campus liaisons were asked to facilitate participant recruitment by identifying faculty and staff involved in, or familiar with, religious, spiritual, and secular practices at the institution. Consequently, 16 individuals were interviewed, including nine faculty and seven staff members. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes. Examples of questions asked during the interviews include: What types of religious, spiritual, and secular engagement activities take place on your campus? What barriers or supports affect the implementation of interfaith programs on this campus? What might be the overall student interest in interfaith initiatives from your perspective? (See interview protocol in [Appendix A](#).)

Liaisons were also encouraged to recruit a wide range of students in terms of their worldview identification, general campus involvement, and interest in interfaith

**Table 1.** Student Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Worldview	Political leaning	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Race/Ethnicity
Ann	Nonreligious	Liberal	Man	Heterosexual	Asian American/Asian
Jamie	Nonreligious	Liberal	Woman	Heterosexual	Mexican American/Chicano
Ruby	Buddhism; Christianity, Protestant	Liberal	Woman	Heterosexual	Mexican American/Chicano
Mia	Christianity, Nondenominational	Liberal	Woman	Heterosexual	Latino/a
Leslie	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Woman	Heterosexual	Latino/a; White/Caucasian
Darbi	Christianity, Protestant	Liberal	Man	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Chace	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Man	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Anne	Christianity, Orthodox	Conservative	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Zac	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Man	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Joe	Christianity, Protestant	Conservative	Man	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Collin	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Man	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Jo	Christianity, Protestant	Conservative	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Regina	Spiritual	Liberal	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Kanye	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Kat	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Wanda	Christianity, Protestant	Moderate	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian
Idris	Christian, Humanist	Moderate	Woman	Heterosexual	White/Caucasian

Note. Students were asked to write in their gender identity.

engagement. A total of 17 students agreed to participate in three focus groups (See participant demographics in Table 1).

Each focus group involved four to eight students and lasted about 90 minutes. Examples of questions posed during the focus groups are: How, if at all, have your attitudes toward people of other worldviews changed while you have been in college? Tell us about those experiences. How would you describe the climate for religion, spirituality, and worldview on your campus? (See focus group protocol in Appendix B.)

To align qualitative findings with the quantitative data collected via the larger IDEALS research project, predetermined codes capturing important constructs from the survey were used for data analysis (Stake, 2006). This *a priori* approach is useful in large-scale, team-based qualitative research because it allows researchers to focus on the study's primary aims (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). A team of four to five researchers, including at least one individual who visited the research site, was responsible for coding and analyzing the data. In total, data from 18 case studies were collected and coded by the research team.

To establish a consistent understanding of the codebook, members of the coding team coded several transcripts and collectively discussed the appropriate application of various codes. Next, the remaining transcripts were each coded by two researchers to enhance trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). After the process of data coding was complete, the research team leader and a research associate who had visited the site examined all coded excerpts to identify salient themes and patterns.

## Limitations

Several limitations to the case study research are worthy of acknowledgment. First, the information offered by our participants may have been biased because we visited

campus at a time that may have been incompatible with certain people's schedules or because of the limited duration of our stay. Second, we recruited participants through a single campus liaison. Thus, it is likely that some individuals beyond the liaison's professional networks did not learn about the opportunity to participate in our case study. Third, our research topic may have appealed to certain students, faculty, staff, or administrators and not others, resulting in an overrepresentation of individuals inclined toward interfaith engagement. Thus, findings related to students' perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes should be interpreted cautiously.

## Findings

The case analysis from SWU revealed three major findings that reflected how and where students at this evangelical institution might have formative experiences that contributed to their interfaith learning and development. First, participants referenced how faculty were able to transform their classrooms into spaces for interfaith learning by enacting pedagogies that encouraged critical reflection on each student's worldview and its relationships to those of others. Second, participants wrestled with informal social engagements with worldview differences, often outside of the classroom. Finally, participants offered that the lack of formal interfaith initiatives may have emerged from the tension between the position of upper-level administrative leadership on interfaith programming and their commitments to preserving the institution's religious identity. We conclude this section by addressing the study's limitations.

### ***“Helping Students Learn How to Stumble”: Classroom Spaces as Catalysts for Interfaith Learning***

Classroom engagement was one of the few places where interfaith learning seemed to occur, as faculty devised numerous approaches and strategies to promote interfaith awareness among students by “helping students learn how to stumble.” For example, one faculty member positively approached having opportunities to talk about different religions: “I always try ... to speak to strengths within traditions. So, if we talk about Jewish traditions, I speak to the strengths in the Jewish tradition.” Another faculty member similarly described taking a relational approach by saying, “I engage [the students] where they're at .... I get to know them .... I always am real with them and say, ‘You're gonna have stuff happen in your life that, it's going to make you ask hard questions.’” Most importantly, faculty seemed to recognize that their classes may be the first time that students' worldviews were challenged. For example, a sociology professor stated, “It's hard for some of them because I'm challenging everything they believed or thought their whole lives.” However, this faculty member continued to emphasize worldview diversity in the class content: “I look at Muslim countries, so we look at Indonesia, we look at Israel, and we look at the role that religion plays in shaping family life, from family values, the family policy, to rituals and traditions.” Another faculty member articulated his goal of provocative classroom engagement as: “helping students learn how to stumble through a conversation in a way that is respectful but also exploratory.”

Representatives from the School of Theology in particular seemed to invite diverse faith perspectives into class conversations. One of these faculty members recognized that interfaith engagement was “not explicitly part of the mission. There’s nothing that says that we promote religious diversity.” However, he described how he and his colleagues worked to bring those elements of dialogue into their classes. He said, “[There’s] a big difference if you can see someone as having first religious truth in a different faith and then also being saved in another tradition. That’s another degree of openness ... reflected by a lot of faculty in [the School of Theology].” One staff member described the theology faculty as “talking about ... really great big ideas around faith and really challenging some of the students in ways that they just have never even considered.” Another staff member commented, “Yes, we’re studying the Bible ... but we’re also studying ... Christian theology as a whole. We’re talking about how that connects to other religions’ theology, how they’re describing God, how we can learn from that.”

The general education curriculum also reportedly featured avenues for students to explore religion, faith, and secularism outside the School of Theology. For example, the first-year seminar was designed to engage students in difficult conversations about their beliefs. One staff member explained, “A lot of the faculty have done a fantastic job of exposing students to some of these conversations much earlier than they had in the past.” A faculty member emphasized the efforts to incorporate profound, meaningful questions in the curriculum:

Three questions that we ask are: Who am I? Who are you, God? And what about my neighbor? ... We’ve built a core curriculum around those three questions, and the [seminar] is one of these courses that’s designed to try to help students delve into that.

Mirroring faculty perspectives, students credited curricular engagement for shaping their worldview. As one student shared, “The things ... that had shaped my worldview during college have been different classes that I’ve taken, both religious and non-religious classes.” Across all focus groups, students described profound experiences and difficult questions with which they grappled in a classroom setting under the guidance of faculty members. One student reflected on her experience with faculty, “[They] will throw new ideas at you all day long ... You never really know what they truly believe because they want you to form that decision for yourself. You’re being exposed to a lot of different things.” Similarly, a student described how his views increasingly expanded as he took more classes:

In [a course titled Christianity in Culture], it was just a challenge to what I was thinking. It was something that made me start out ... making me analyze why I thought what I thought. Then, the follow-up, the [Diversity and Culture] class was just kind of exposing other backgrounds, other ideas. It’s just information that you don’t get on a daily basis.

A student described the impact of a Bible class where the professor “challenged us to think about the narrow vision of what we heard and really delve into the rest of it.” Similarly, another student described applying what she learned in a sociology class to understand her parents: “My parents are of ... very different political views, and I was able to see that based on the different things that they have experienced, why they chose to believe what they did ... I remember having that realization during classes.”

Honors classes were described as being incredibly rich experiences for students and, according to one health major, “a strong point of our university.” Another student echoed her appreciation of the Honors classes, “You’re just really challenged to think about why you think the things that you think ... and really owning that for yourself.” A student commented on the thoughtful facilitation of the professor, “She tries to make you think .... It’s made me question things that I held so tightly that I didn’t really have a strong basis for holding tightly to other than that’s what my community had growing up.” That is not to say that students stopped believing what they believed before taking those classes, but the open and intentional dialogue about faith helped students to understand what they believed and why. As one student reflected, “Discussion-based classes are what helped my worldview be strengthened or molded or shifted to what it is, just because of the fact that we had to sit down and actually think about what our worldview was.” One staff member was positive in her description of the learning environment on campus: “Because of the culture I think we’ve created, especially in the classroom, students are more open to differences than other Baptist or conservative Christian universities.” Similarly, a faculty seemed hopeful about the role of the university in bridging gaps across difference:

If there are any institutions poised to try to breach that [cultural division], it’s the church, and it’s the university. Being a Christian university, we’re both. So, I think we’re primed if we take the lead, and that’s the key.

Although pedagogical practices seemed to be most effective in engaging students with religious, spiritual, and secular diversity, the contribution of faculty members extended beyond the boundaries of their classrooms. For example, some faculty invited speakers representing diverse perspectives, despite pushback from other faculty or administrators. A faculty member described one event with a facilitated dialogue between an atheist and a former pastor, saying, “It created a lot of buzz on campus because it forced students to reckon with the fact that not everybody thinks the same way that they do, even about God, and that’s okay.” One faculty member in sociology commented on how students who had studied abroad were able to better understand difficult concepts from class. A student who had taken this faculty member’s class exploring how religion shapes differences in the life, values, policies, rituals, and traditions of families around the world was then able to connect that learning experience with her time abroad:

There was something that we had talked about ... she’d been exposed to it. So, when she had seen something that was different, she recognized it ... but she wasn’t so shocked. She said, you know, “I saw it, I saw it in real life, and I got it.”

Despite not being spaces for interfaith learning and development per se, classrooms were referenced as sites where assumptions were challenged and beliefs tested.

### ***“Struggling with Doubt”: Interfaith Learning Compromised in the Face of Uncertainties***

The data indicated a hesitation toward interfaith engagement on behalf of students, faculty, and staff, sometimes out of fear of non-evangelical ideas represented by those who held non-Christian worldviews. In the words of one faculty member, “A big barrier is fear,” and a staff member disclosed, “We’re not allowed to have a difference of opinion

here.” Yet multiple students described keeping their thoughts or beliefs to themselves out of fear of being judged or coerced. For example, an atheist student chose to tell others that he was Christian because he “didn’t want to be preached to or evangelized or get into that very long conversation.” Another student, who had previously been Christian but identified as spiritual at the time of the focus group, expressed having a sense of frustration with the pressure to convert or attend a particular church:

[SWU] is not super accepting of religions outside of Christianity, which I expect in coming here because it is a Baptist.... But sometimes it is frustrating when someone asks you, "What church do you go to?" and the simple answer of "I just don't attend church," turns into this long religious conversation of trying to convert me, and I'm like, look, I know all that. I used to be a Christian. I studied the Bible all the time. And now it's my personal choice, and it's my journey.

Another non-Baptist student avoided worldview conversations altogether and said, “I do kind of tend to myself sometimes, whenever religious conversations come up outside ... the theological classes where those conversations are welcomed. I just kind of sit back, and listen, and take in what other people have to say.” It seemed that a result of these interfaith and intra-faith dynamics—different perspectives represented within a specific faith, spiritual, or secular tradition (see Small, 2020)—was that some students avoided exploring their worldviews out of fear of being outed as non-Christians to their peers. One staff member commented that students were hesitant to be open and honest even in one-on-one settings and described one scenario in which a student told her, “I just never know who I can trust here.” Another staff member described how SWU “is an extremely stifling place.... [Students] feel like they have to put on a mask.” This staff member went on to explain the impact this climate has on students who are “struggling with doubt ... when we aren’t allowed in the culture to have those kind[s] of dialogue, then we do feel alone.” Students also reflected these negative perceptions of the climate in their stories. For example, one student described the barrier to accessing counseling services as follows:

[Counselors] choose more of a faith-based counseling approach .... From some people who I've talked to, they don't feel comfortable going to the counseling center, more so for that reason that they feel like they can't build a rapport with the therapist, and sometimes might be judged, because sometimes they just feel like if the therapy that they're trying to get is mostly based on faith and the Scripture, they can't really grow, because they either, they don't understand what Scripture that the person is saying, or it just doesn't connect with them. That creates a barrier. I don't think that's very good.

The population of international students at SWU seemed to be particularly affected by the chilly campus climate with regard to interfaith. One student observed that her friends who are international students “keep their separate ideas to themselves because they know that those things won’t be welcomed .... They know the norm here is that you’re a Baptist and you’re a Christian.” In the words of one faculty, the inclusion of international students on campus, particularly those who are not Christian, seemed to be “a challenge for interfaith awareness on campus.” Yet participants described some efforts taken to create a more welcoming environment for international students, as demonstrated by a staff member who shared, “We’ve just celebrated our first International Month where we have students from other countries and other cultures have the opportunity to put on programs, do presentations, have kind of a culture

celebration.” Importantly, the progress toward a more inclusive climate at SWU was not lost on the one international student who participated in our focus groups:

Since I’ve been here, the two years I’ve been here, I feel like SWU tried to make large strides to be even more welcoming to other people. Like, I feel like, they’re trying to ... get more international students. And I think they are trying; they are making efforts to be more welcoming and more inclusive and more diverse students. And there are groups on campus, whether started by a student or not, that are trying to be more inclusive.

Among our participants, there seemed to be an acknowledgment that the campus climate was challenging, and agreement that there was more work to do, but no agreement about having a clear path forward. One staff member summarized this sentiment well, “I think there’s some education that needs to happen there about why... more interfaith dialogue is needed ... We need to be able to engage with other religions in a healthy way and a respectful way.”

### ***“I Think It’s a Sore Topic”: Institutional Leadership Perceived at Odds with Formal Interfaith Initiatives***

Study participants emphasized that SWU strives to be a welcoming place for all. As one staff member said, “You don’t have to be a Christian to go to SWU. We welcome everybody.” A student affirmed this positive view of the campus: “From what I’ve seen and experienced ... I’ve never seen anybody explicitly discriminated [against] and hated on or bashed for having a different worldview than the expected Christianity.” That said, there seemed to be some discrepancy between individual interactions and the perception of institutional attitudes with regard to formalizing interfaith engagement. As one student said, “If you talk to people, I can’t think of anyone that would reject or separate you because of thinking differently.... Institutionally, the warmth is not the same.” A student expressed her perception that members of the administration “really want to encourage cultural diversity, but when it comes to religious diversity, I think it’s a sore topic, and it’s ... difficult to talk about.”

Students we interviewed seemed to perceive that institutional leaders “want to have control of whatever religious activities occur on campus.” Another student affirmed the sentiment by saying, “Student life, all of the institutional part of the school, the Board of Trustees, the president, those people, the people in charge who keep a tight rein on things.” This tension was even more pronounced in the experiences of staff and administrators. One faculty member stated that staff and administrators “are trying to walk a fine line. They have trustees that they need to be accountable to, but they also have a university mission that they are accountable to as well. Holding those two things in balance ... is a challenge.” One staff member summarized her perceptions of upper-level decision-makers as attending to the perspectives of important stakeholders who may be averse to interfaith engagement:

We get some pushback... that’s of the more conservative, less wanting to move forward, progressive side in general .... That’s the vibe that we get as staff. We have people at the top who are making decisions that are doing so for maybe political reasons.

The evangelical identity of SWU clearly mattered to faculty and staff and was acknowledged and emphasized across our data. As one staff member said, “Anyone who

comes here is going to know who we are .... Anyone who signs up here knows what they're getting themselves into." Speculating on why institutional leaders may hesitate to promote interfaith engagement, a staff member explained, "Having open dialogue, ... I think it makes some of our upper administration ... and our Board of Trustees a little nervous about that aspect because we are of a Baptist descent." A faculty member shed further light on these tensions:

I know many of the Trustees ... maybe [among] their concerns or interests would be the reputation of the school... What will members of their church think if SWU were engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths? Or is SWU irreligious?

This hesitation to formally engage across worldviews for fear of "doctrinal impurity" was notable in the interview and focus group responses of faculty and staff. A staff member identified that the religious affiliation "could be a barrier for some that are so ... staunch that way, that [they] can't think that we need to think about the others ... and be able to have an open dialogue and listen to other perspectives." Another staff member speculated that "some people are threatened by interfaith anything because they feel like they're not being a good Christian ... if they allow other people a voice." Similarly, a theology professor spoke of the "fear that we might become un-Baptist if we open up the dialogue .... There are segments of Baptists who would feel like this would be a threat to our heritage." A sociology professor explained:

We will be perceived as being doctrinally impure and less serious about our faith as a result of [interfaith engagement] .... There's probably a lot of people who would feel open to different kinds of interfaith activities but don't want to be the one to initiate or advocate for it, because "I don't want to be the crazy one who y'all think is not a real Christian."

For some participants, how the mission of the institution intersected with interfaith work highlighted a tension between evangelism as conversion versus a presentation of God's love. One faculty member recalled, "[People on campus] couldn't understand why we would have someone from another faith on campus unless the sole purpose was to convert them." Another faculty explained:

There's a fear that, say by bringing somebody ... and saying, "We're not going to try to convert this guy. We're just going to try to get to know him and realize that atheists are humans." There are some Baptists who would be very uncomfortable about that and say, "We've got to convert this person." We don't.

Continuing to underscore the mixed perceptions on evangelism as conversion, another staff member said she felt a pressure to "do those interfaith things as far as conversion or evangelism." A faculty member conveyed his view of evangelism-as-conversion as an interfaith barrier in this manner:

[The] perception [is] that the best way to show Christian love toward people who follow other faiths is to convert them .... So just the idea that you would have meetings where you want to learn from each other ... rather than we're doing this with the ulterior motive of one day converting these people, is a new idea.

Others on campus still centered evangelism as part of the institutional mission, but more often described it in terms of sharing or exposing the love of God to the world rather than a conversion process. As an example, a staff member explained, "When you believe in Jesus ... you want people that you care about, love, to come to find Jesus. I

believe that's part of my mission.... I believe that's part of the mission of the university." One faculty member articulated the same sentiment: "We are ... an institution of higher education.... Why do I teach at a Christian institution? Because I believe in those values. It's not that I dislike that person who has a different faith." Some students also recognized the value of kindly introducing others to Christianity through interfaith engagement, as exemplified by this quote from a student:

The reason why we should be open to interfaith discussions and things is because [it is] our job as Christians .... A lot of people that go here are Christians, who want us to know Jesus, and we want them to experience the love of Jesus. Inviting people to something where they can share opens up discussion, versus just like, "We're going to shove it down your throats just because you come to this school."

## Discussion

How can an evangelical institution center its religious history, traditions, and theology while making room for others? Even more poignantly, how can evangelical institutions locate the importance of interfaith work within, not outside of, their values as Christian colleges and universities? Addressing these questions is layered, complicated by the particular dynamics that sometimes occur at evangelical institutions among evangelical students and their peers holding different worldviews. Ours is not to provide a singular response to the questions that guided this study, but add to the mosaic of information evangelical educators can use to make more informed decisions about their practices, both in and out of the classroom.

Given the structure of the formal course-taking experiences, professors can provide the safety needed to engage in the different conversations that can be brought on by religious differences. Fear, doubt, struggle—these are the emotions many students carry into their college experiences, often escalated in the face of exposure to difference (Bryant, 2011). When presented with religious differences, the emotional risk for students at evangelical institutions might be even more pronounced, given the high personal and interpersonal stakes that often underscore these conversations, especially in evangelical contexts.

How might invitations to discuss religious differences seed religious doubt and potential faith crises for the evangelical student or potential religious shaming for the non-evangelical student? Indeed, the skillful educators students referenced at this institution helped them productively manage these challenges by providing brave and safe spaces for students to openly engage "hard" questions about their own religious beliefs in the classroom.

Perhaps the research design of this study can provide some insight into the important questions being raised by these findings and the work of the larger IDEALS project. Remember that SWU was selected for its lack of formal interfaith efforts and because its students reported interfaith learning and development gains over the course of the first year in college. Perhaps students who enroll in evangelical colleges are poised distinctively to make interfaith learning and developmental gains, despite the lack of formal interfaith effort and the "fears," "doubts," and "struggles" associated with engaging religious differences.

Additionally, research has documented the positive effects of religious struggle—when appropriately supported—on many attributes of a person's well-being. For example, the

body of work produced by Pargament (1990, 1996) and extended by Bryant and Astin (2008) collectively suggests that religious struggle may be a cornerstone of learning and development, especially related to religion, spirituality, and secularity. Similarly, according to Bryant (2011), religious struggles can have “promising developmental implications for students’ pluralistic competence, despite the difficult emotions that likely go hand-in-hand with struggling” (p. 456). Yet Bryant also cautioned that “students’ discomfort and struggle is developmentally significant, but safeguards must be in place on campuses to ensure that students have adequate resources for managing the difficult questions and emotions that may emerge” (pp. 456-457).

One question for consideration is the extent to which the emotions reported by community members personify if not symbolically convey the emotions of the evangelical institution? Institutional religious struggle may be as prominent a narrative on evangelical campuses as the religious struggle reported by their constituents, especially regarding interfaith learning and development. For interfaith champions, the value underscoring that interfaith learning and development is not a means to an end—fruitful only as a means of eventually converting people—but as an end itself, part of the embedded fabrics of social cooperation and participation in a diverse democracy. From the perspective of our participants, it was clear that the institution which was the focus of this case study struggles with messaging about the value of religious diversity due to its deep roots in the evangelical tradition. Indeed, participants used words like “doctrinal impurity,” “expected Christianity,” and concepts like “differential warmth” to describe the struggle that remains at the heart of this institution’s interfaith posture or lack thereof. Educators at evangelical institutions have opportunities, and perhaps obligations, to develop and communicate an evangelical value system that includes and not excludes—that embraces diversity and the richness it brings to the campus community.

### **Implications for Practice**

To navigate a diverse world, students, including those enrolled at evangelical colleges, should be equipped with the skills often associated with the interfaith movement, such as knowledge of different religious and spiritual perspectives, the appreciation of interreligious commonalities and differences, and the ability to work with people from diverse perspectives. Although most students enter a campus environment with knowledge of and commitment to the university’s affiliations and mission, college remains a time of personal exploration during which students often challenge their existing assumptions (see Shim & Perez, 2018), including those associated with religion, spirituality, and secularism. Rather than resist exploration and the developmental hurdles it engenders, evangelical educators should expect students to grapple with their worldviews and question their values—sometimes beliefs shift, oftentimes they are strengthened (Mayhew et al., 2020). If educators’ expectations of students are aligned with their experiences, students will feel safe to voice their opinions and beliefs, rather than being fearful to express them.

In addition to re-emphasizing college as a time for worldview exploration, educators should prioritize well-being and mental health services as places of trust for students to engage in all forms of questioning and struggle. We were concerned with the hesitation

to engage with counselors about topics of religion and spirituality as such distrust may have deleterious effects on students' mental health. Early research by Bryant and Astin (2008) affirmed that "struggles of a spiritual nature are a reality for college students" (p. 23). These scholars emphasized the "critical implications of struggling spiritually that are intimately tied to students' sense of well-being and adjustment to the adult world. Failure to recognize the seriousness of these facets of students' lives is to leave them quite alone on their quest to understand central issues of meaning" (p. 23). Administrators should ensure that counseling and mental health services on their campuses are de-stigmatized, de-mystified, and remain zones free of judgment, conducive to productively resolving students' spiritual struggles (Bryant, 2011; Carter, 2019; Pargament, 1990, 1996).

Further, educators would benefit from listening to the perspective of international students who often hold worldview beliefs different from evangelical Christianity. Many Christian liberal arts institutions are engaging in intentional efforts to recruit and enroll international students (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009), a population that brings an array of diverse perspectives. Inviting these students' perspectives through intentional efforts may help institutional stakeholders learn more about designing effective programs for engaging productive interactions across differences. More broadly speaking, providing spaces for cultural expression remains critical, as religious diversity cannot be engaged responsibly without accounting for intersecting aspects of diversity and the hegemonic ways Christian nationalism has expressed itself on American college campuses (Edwards, 2018b).

Finally, institutions should support faculty efforts to bring interfaith conversations into curricular spaces. The attention that some faculty members gave to interfaith engagement within their classes and the positive responses from students are promising and attest to the central role faculty play in initiating interfaith efforts (Taylor, 2013). Faculty members often have the freedom to express and represent diverse views in their classes, and our data indicate that classroom engagement is an invaluable tool for interfaith learning and development, even if not explicitly stated as such.

Faculty should be encouraged to continue this work and perhaps pursue external grants from organizations, like Interfaith Youth Core, with expertise in helping faculty enact effective interfaith pedagogies in the classroom. Additionally, it may be beneficial to create opportunities for dialogue among faculty members to explore the utility and appropriateness of interfaith engagement, especially at evangelical institutions. Professional development workshops, seminars, and webinars offered by outside organizations may be useful for helping faculty at evangelical institutions ready themselves for conversations with interfaith undertones.

## Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to interfaith learning and development, especially among evangelical institutions such as the case study site that was the focus of this study. Shared values that could drive both the interfaith and evangelical movements include an emphasis on appreciation over tolerance, dialogue alongside didactics, working with instead of against religious difference, and embracing diversity in lieu of using

difference as a means toward an end. What educators do with these striking similarities remains to be seen.

To support interfaith ideas, findings from this study highlight the need for evangelical colleges to thoughtfully and intentionally create and provide trusting spaces where students can struggle openly and question what they know through what is known by religiously diverse others and ideas. Reframing Christian epistemic assumptions about minoritized religious worldviews becomes an important starting place for initiating trust among community stakeholders: Welcoming different religious narratives and ideas does not necessarily mean adopting them completely. At the very least, educators at evangelical institutions can be certain that practices that carry interfaith energies—even when nonexplicit—help students of all faith and non-faith-based traditions grow spiritually without compromising their commitments to the evangelical faith.

## Data source

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is a national study that is led by co-principal investigators Dr. Matthew Mayhew (The Ohio State University) and Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach (North Carolina State University) in partnership with the nonprofit, Interfaith America, formerly known as Interfaith Youth Core.

## Funding

The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) research is made possible by funders including The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, and the Julian Grace Foundation.

## ORCID

Matthew J. Mayhew  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1720-1162>

Musbah Shaheen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9551-026X>

B. Ashley Staples  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3967-9159>

## References

- Abelman, R., & Dalessandro, A. (2009). Institutional vision in Christian higher education: A comparison of ACCU, ELCA, and CCCU institutions. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 18(1), 84–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656210902751792>
- Armstrong, C. L., & Kim, Y. K. (2016). Unique patterns of cognitive outcomes for undergraduate students at Southern Baptist colleges: A comparative analysis. *Christian Higher Education*, 15(4), 230–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1188438>
- Armstrong, C. L., & Kim, Y. K. (2019). Civic development among college students at Southern Baptist colleges and universities. *Christian Higher Education*, 18(3), 188–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1477075>
- Basham, K., & Hughes, M. (2012). Creating and sustaining interfaith cooperation on Christian campuses: Tools and challenges. *Journal of College and Character*, 13(2), 0–7. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2012-1900>
- Bryant, A. N. (2011). The impact of campus context, college encounters, and religious/spiritual struggle on ecumenical worldview. *Research in Higher Education*, 52(5), 441–459. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9205-0>

- Bryant, A. N., & Astin, H. S. (2008). The correlates of spiritual struggle during the college years. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2008.11772084>
- Carter, I. M., Montes, A., Gonzalez, B., Wagoner, Z., Reyes, N., & Escoffery-Runnels, V. (2020). Critical interfaith praxis in higher education: The interfaith collective. In J. T. Snipes & S. Manson (Eds.), *Remixed and reimagined: Innovations in religion, spirituality, and (inter)faith in higher education* (pp. 29–43). Meyers Education Press.
- Carter, J. L. (2019). The predictors of religious struggle among undergraduates attending evangelical institutions. *Christian Higher Education*, 18(4), 236–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1517619>
- Crabtree, B. F., & Miller, W. L. (1999). Using codes and code manuals: A template organizing style of interpretation. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 163–178). SAGE Publications.
- Crandall, R. E., Morin, S. M., Duran, A., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2020). Examining institutional support structures and worldview climate for sexual minority students in Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 19(3), 192–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2019.1664353>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Edwards, S. (2017). Intergroup dialogue & religious identity: Attempting to raise awareness of Christian privilege & religious oppression. *Multicultural Education*, 24(2), 18–24.
- Edwards, S. (2018a). Critical reflections on the interfaith movement: A social justice perspective. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 11(2), 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000053>
- Edwards, S. (2018b). Distinguishing between belief and culture: A critical perspective on religious identity. *Journal of College and Character*, 19(3), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2018.1481097>
- Hammond, M. D. (2019). Christian higher education in the United States: The crisis of evangelical identity. *Christian Higher Education*, 18(1–2), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1554352>
- Larson, M. H., & Shady, S. L. (2012). Confronting the complexities of Christian privilege through interfaith dialogue. *Journal of College and Character*, 13(2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2012-1824>
- Litfin, D. (2004). *Conceiving the Christian College*. Eerdmans.
- Mayhew, M. J. (2012). A multi-level examination of the influence of institutional type on the moral reasoning development of first-year students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(3), 367–388. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1162-011-9231-6>
- Mayhew, M. J., & Rockenbach, A. N. (2021). Interfaith learning and development. *Journal of College and Character*, 22(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2020.1860778>
- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., & Bowman, N. A. (2016). The connection between interfaith engagement and self-authored worldview commitment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(4), 362–379. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0046>
- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., & Dahl, L. S. (2020). Owning faith: First-year college-going and the development of students' self-authored worldview commitments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 91(6), 977–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1732175>
- Moran, C. D., Lang, D. J., & Oliver, J. (2007). Cultural incongruity and social status ambiguity: The experiences of evangelical Christian student leaders at two midwestern public universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(1), 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0004>
- Oklahoma City University. (n.d.). *Mission statement*. <https://www.okbu.edu/about/mission/statement.html>
- Pargament, K. I. (1990). God help me: Toward a theoretical framework of coping for the psychology of religion. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 2, 195–224. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00938065>
- Pargament, K. I. (1996). Religious methods of coping: Resources for the conservation and transformation of significance. In E. Shafranske (Ed.), *Religion and the clinical practice of psychology* (pp. 215–239). APA Books. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10199-008>

- Paredes-Collins, K., & Collins, C. S. (2011). The intersection of race and spirituality: Underrepresented students' spiritual development at predominantly white evangelical colleges. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 20(1), 73–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2011.557586>
- Patel, E., & Meyer, C. (2009). Engaging religious diversity on campus: The role of interfaith leadership. *Journal of College and Character*, 10(7), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1436>
- Patel, E., & Meyer, C. (2011). The civic relevance for interfaith cooperation for colleges and universities. *Journal of College and Character*, 12(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1764>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Poppinga, A., Larson, M., & Shady, S. (2019). Building bridges across faith lines: Responsible Christian education in a post-Christian society. *Christian Higher Education*, 18(1–2), 98–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1542906>
- Rine, P. J., & Guthrie, D. S. (2016). Steering the ship through uncertain waters: Empirical analysis and the future of evangelical higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 15(1–2), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1107347>
- Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., & Morin, S., Associates. (2018). *Best practices for interfaith learning and development in the first year of college*. Interfaith Youth Core. <https://ifyc.org/resources/best-practices-interfaith-learning-and-development-first-year-college>
- Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Giess, M. E., Morin, S. M., Staples, B. A., & Correia-Harker, B. P. (2020). *IDEALS: Bridging religious divides through higher education*. Interfaith Youth Core. <https://ifyc.org/sites/default/files/navigating-religious-diversity-9-27.pdf>
- Shim, W., & Perez, R. J. (2018). A multi-level examination of first-year students' openness to diversity and challenge. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(4), 453–477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1434277>
- Small, J. L. (2020). *Critical religious pluralism in higher education: A social justice framework to support religious diversity*. Routledge.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. The Guilford Press.
- Staples, B. A., Dahl, L. S., Mayhew, M. J., & Rockenbach, A. N. (2019). Worldview climate and the international student experience: Internationalization strategies overlook interfaith necessities. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 4, 149–176. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4434>
- Taylor, D. L. (2013). Culturally relevant pedagogy and behaviors: A study of faculty beliefs at six Christian postsecondary institutions. *Christian Higher Education*, 12(1–2), 51–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2013.739443>
- Wheaton College. (n.d.). *The Mission of Wheaton College*. <https://www.wheaton.edu/about-wheaton/why-wheaton/mission/>

## **Appendix A Faculty/Staff/Administrator Interview Protocol IDEALS Case Study (30–60 Minutes)**

One researcher will conduct the individual interview. Responsibilities of the interviewer include:

- Securing a signed informed consent;
- Managing the recording device(s);
- Taking notes throughout the interview; and
- Completing a thorough memo upon conclusion of the interview.

*When you meet with the participant, introduce yourself and share a copy of the consent form and demographic survey. Ask them to peruse these documents and let you know of any questions that arise. Point out that the participant can choose a pseudonym and record it at the top of the demographic survey to ensure confidentiality. Questions on the demographic survey may be skipped if they choose.*

*Once forms have been completed and collected...*

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview today. I am < name and title >. I am part of the research team for the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). I will be asking you a series of questions during our time together today, and taking notes as we go.

As you know from reading the consent form, this study is intended to shed light on how students, faculty, and staff holding different worldviews perceive and experience worldview diversity within their campus community. To facilitate our conversation today, I would like to define a few terms:

- The term “worldview” describes a guiding philosophy or outlook on life, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, non-religious perspective, or some combination of these.
- “Interfaith” describes the coming together of people or perspectives rooted in different religious, spiritual, or non-religious beliefs.

For the purpose of this interview, you will be invited to share your perceptions of worldview diversity and interfaith engagement on this campus. In doing so, please feel free to draw from, and describe, any personal experiences that are relevant to the study.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask, and you are welcome to refrain from answering anything that you would rather not discuss. Also, please feel free to excuse yourself at any time without consequence. This conversation is strictly confidential and care will be taken by our research team to exclude names and identifying information from the data when they are reported.

Do you have questions before we begin? *Answer any questions raised.* Now, let’s get started.

I am going to audio record this conversation so that your thoughts and experiences are accurately documented. If at any time you would like me to turn off the recording device, please let me know. *Begin audio recording.*

### **Block 1: Introductory Information**

1. **Faculty:** To begin, please tell me your name, your department, courses you teach, and/or groups you advise at INSTITUTION.

**Staff:** To begin, please tell me your name, your position on campus, and the groups or activities you oversee at INSTITUTION.

**Administrators:** To begin, please tell me your name, your position on campus, and the core responsibilities of your leadership role at INSTITUTION.

2. **Tell me about your interest in interfaith initiatives on campus.**

### **Block 2: Campus-Wide Engagement/Climate Questions**

3. **What types of interfaith engagement activities take place on your campus?**

PROBE: What are your primary avenues for involvement in interfaith programs?

—OR—

PROBE: What are the most common and/or effective approaches to interfaith programming here (e.g., interfaith dialogue, service, debate)?

—OR— \*\*\*\*\*ONLY FOR STAKEHOLDERS WITH SIGNIFICANT INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE\*\*\*\*\*

PROBE: Can you walk me through the history/evolution of interfaith work on this campus?

**4. What barriers or supports affect the implementation of interfaith programs on this campus?**

PROBE: Have you been encouraged or discouraged to get involved in interfaith efforts at INSTITUTION? How so?

—OR— \*\*\*\*\*ONLY FOR RELIGIOUSLY-AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS\*\*\*\*\*

PROBE: Do you find that INSTITUTION'S religious affiliation creates opportunities or challenges for conducting interfaith work on this campus? How so?

**5. How does worldview diversity fit into the mission and vision of your office, department, or institution?**

PROBE: Do institutional leaders communicate about the priority of interfaith engagement? If so, when and how?

**6. How would you describe the overall climate for worldview diversity on your campus?**

PROBE: What factors do you think contribute to creating the climate for worldview diversity on your campus?

—OR—

PROBE: How would you describe the worldview diversity on your campus?

**Block 3: Student-Specific Questions****7. What is the overall student interest in interfaith initiatives from your perspective?**

PROBE: Which programmatic approaches do students seem to gravitate toward the most?

**8. Do you discuss worldview diversity, spiritual development, or the search for meaning and purpose with students? Why or why not?**

PROBE: Walk me through a discussion you've had with a student about worldview diversity.

**9. How effective do you think students at INSTITUTION are at navigating differences that arise when discussing worldview identity?****10. Next, I would like to share a few data points from the survey we administered to students here at INSTITUTION. Please respond with your thoughts about these findings. For example, feel free to tell me if any of the findings surprise you, or how you might make sense of them given your experiences on campus. \*\*\*\*\*IF NECESSARY, NOTE THAT WE ARE NOT ASKING THEM TO SPECULATE; RATHER, WE WANT THEM TO SHARE HOW FINDINGS ALIGN WITH OR DIVERGE FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE\*\*\*\*\***

- a. 57 percent of first-year students at SWU in the 2015-2016 academic year felt that campus was welcoming of people with diverse religious and non-religious perspectives, whereas 82 percent of students in the national sample reported the same.
- b. Among the sample of first-year students surveyed at SWU, roughly one in five indicated that they have participated in leadership of campus interfaith initiatives. Nationally, only 1 in 20 students reported the same
- c. 13 percent of first-year students surveyed at SWU indicated that they participated in an internship that allowed them to use interfaith skills, compared to less than 2 percent nationally

**Block 4: Wrap-Up**

Those are all the formal questions I have for you. I want to conclude by giving you an opportunity to share concluding thoughts or questions. *Allow time for the participant to share remarks.* If you think of something you would like to add after leaving today, please feel free to email me. I really appreciate your time!

*After participant departs, the researcher should complete a memo documenting their impressions from the interview (using protocol provided).*

## Appendix B Student Focus Group Protocol IDEALS Case Study (45–90 Minutes)

- Researcher 1 will conduct the focus group and complete memo upon conclusion of the interview.
- Researcher 2 will oversee check-in, collect all forms/notecards, take notes throughout (including documenting who is speaking), and manage the recording device.
- **Note:** Both researchers should be attuned to who is speaking at any given time, and prompt participants to announce themselves using their pseudonyms every time they speak.

*As students arrive/enter, share copies of the consent form and demographic survey with them. Ask them to have a seat and peruse these documents while we wait for other group members to arrive. Let them know their signed consent form and completed survey will be collected when the focus group begins. Questions on the demographic survey may be skipped if they choose.*

*Point out that students can choose a pseudonym and record it at the top of the demographic survey to ensure confidentiality. Also ask them to fill out a name plate with their pseudonym and place it such that it is visible to other members of the group.*

*Once everyone has arrived and forms have been collected...*

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group today. I am <name and title> and this is <colleague name and title>. We are both members of the research team for the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). I will be asking you a series of questions during our time together today, and <colleague> will be taking notes as we go.

As you know from reading the consent form, this study is intended to shed light on how students, faculty, and staff holding different religious, spiritual, or non-religious perspectives perceive and experience worldview diversity within their campus community. To facilitate our conversation today, I would like to define a few terms:

- The term “worldview” describes a guiding philosophy or outlook on life, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, non-religious perspective, or some combination of these.
- “Interfaith” describes the coming together of people or perspectives rooted in different religious, spiritual, or non-religious beliefs.

For the purpose of this focus group, you will be invited to share your perceptions of worldview diversity and interfaith engagement on this campus. In doing so, please feel free to draw from, and describe, any personal experiences that are relevant to the study.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask, and you are welcome to refrain from answering anything that you would rather not discuss. Also, please feel free to excuse yourself at any time without consequence. This conversation is strictly confidential and care will be taken by the researchers to exclude names and identifying information from the data when they are reported. I also ask that you do not share what is said in this interview with anyone outside of this group.

Do you have questions before we begin? *Answer any questions raised.* Now, let’s get started.

### Block 1: Introductory Information

First of all, I’d like you to complete a short exercise to get you thinking about how you’ve developed your worldview—that is, your outlook on life—during college. Please take a few minutes to respond in writing to the prompt on this sheet. *Hand out half-sheets and read prompt.* When you’re done, write your pseudonym and focus group number at the bottom of the paper <provide them with focus group number>. For the rest of our time together, please feel free to jot notes that relate to our conversation on the back of this sheet. I will collect them at the end.

*Give approximately 3 minutes for this exercise.*

Thank you. Now I'd like to move into the question portion of this focus group. We are going to audio record this conversation so that your thoughts and experiences are accurately documented. I ask that you do your best to state your pseudonym each time you speak, so we can recall which comments are yours when listening to the recording later on.

*Begin audio recording.*

1. **Let's begin by introducing ourselves.** Tell me your name (pseudonym), your major, your year in school, and share briefly how you responded to the prompt on your card.  
PROBE: What aspects of the college environment have been particularly instrumental in shaping your worldview?
2. **How, if at all, have your attitudes toward people of other worldviews changed while you have been in college?**  
PROBE: To what do you attribute these changes in your attitudes?

### **Block 2: Climate/Environment Questions**

Next, I'd like to discuss your perceptions of the campus environment at SWU, as well as students' experiences and attitudes with respect to worldview diversity.

3. **How would you describe the climate for religion, spirituality, and worldview on your campus?**  
PROBE: What factors do you think contribute to creating the worldview climate on your campus?  
—OR—  
PROBE: To what extent do you feel comfortable expressing your worldview beliefs on campus? What aspects of the campus environment shape your comfort level in this regard?
4. **During the 2015-2016 academic year, we surveyed first-year students on this campus about their experiences and attitudes relating to worldview diversity and interfaith engagement. In doing so, we learned that 57 percent of first-year students at SWU in the 2015-2016 academic year felt that campus was welcoming of people with diverse religious and non-religious perspectives, whereas 82 percent of students in the national sample reported the same.**
5. **. How might you explain or make sense of this finding given your experiences on campus?**  
\*\*\*\*\*IF NECESSARY, NOTE THAT WE ARE NOT ASKING THEM TO SPECULATE; RATHER, WE WANT THEM TO SHARE HOW FINDINGS ALIGN WITH OR DIVERGE FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE\*\*\*\*\*

### **Block 3: Experience/Engagement Questions**

Finally, we are going to spend some time talking about student involvement in interfaith activities at SWU.

6. **Have you been involved in interfaith activities on campus (e.g., interfaith dialogue, interfaith prayer vigil, interfaith service project)? If so, tell us about those experiences.**  
PROBE: What factors impacted your decision to participate in these activities?  
—AND—  
PROBE: Where on campus do most of these activities take place? Or, where do you find yourself discussing interfaith topics the most? *Note responses for possible observation sites.*
7. **Do you feel that your understanding of other worldview perspectives has grown/developed through your participation in interfaith activities? [If yes...] What has influenced that growth?**
8. **Among the sample of first-year students we surveyed at SWU, Among the sample of first-year students surveyed at SWU, roughly one in five indicated that they have participated in**

leadership of campus interfaith initiatives. Nationally, only 1 in 20 students reported the same

**9. Does this surprise you? Why or why not? \*\*\*\*\*IF NECESSARY, NOTE THAT WE ARE NOT ASKING THEM TO SPECULATE; RATHER, WE WANT THEM TO SHARE HOW FINDINGS ALIGN WITH OR DIVERGE FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE\*\*\*\*\***

#### **Block 4: Wrap-Up**

**10. Lastly, I want to ask if there is anything else you would like to share that we didn't already cover?**

Those are all the questions I have for you. If you think of something you would like to add after leaving today, please feel free to email us. Also, be on the lookout for an email containing information about accessing your \$15 Amazon gift card. Thanks for your time!

*Be sure all notecards have been collected and that each has a pseudonym on the back. After participants depart, Researcher 1 should complete a memo documenting their impressions from the interview (using protocol provided).*