




**BEING OPENLY  
SECULAR AT SCHOOL**  
A Toolkit for Students





*Being Openly Secular at School: A Toolkit for Students*  
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Secular Student Bill of Rights co-authored with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, [www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org)

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## ABOUT THE OPENLY SECULAR CAMPAIGN

Openly Secular is a coalition project that promotes tolerance and equality of people regardless of their belief systems. Founded in 2013, the Openly Secular Coalition is led by four organizations - Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and Stiefel Freethought Foundation. This campaign is also joined by national partner organizations from the secular movement as well as organizations that are allies to our cause.

## OUR MISSION

The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by getting secular people - including atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and nonreligious people - to be open about their beliefs.



## A SPECIAL NOTE

Dear Reader,

One of the greatest challenges secular people face is overcoming anti-secular stigma in a culture where religious belief is normal and even expected. When doing the research for this guide, I realized just how true this is. I looked at hundreds of websites and read resource guides on everything from interfaith dialogue to how to be civil and resolve conflict. My goal was to answer two questions - What unique challenges do secular students face? and How can Openly Secular help?

I looked at student programs and campus life at colleges all across the country. I focused specifically on student health and wellness, LGBT/Women's centers, and programs for multiculturalism and diversity. On a few occasions, I found schools with a webpage dedicated to religion and spiritual life. The amount of information and online resources varied by school, but the content was more or less the same. If I were a student of color, or studying from abroad for a semester, or queer-identified, I would be able to access my institution's website and within a few clicks, find a program or resources for my community.

Secular people have a history of oppression and moral injustice, yet as a whole, I couldn't find resources for secular students anywhere on the university sites I visited - not in diversity or multicultural groups, not included in programs for religion and spiritual life, not even lumped in with LGBT communities, who

are three times more likely to identify as secular. I couldn't find a single counseling, wellness, or self-help resource specifically for secular students. Sadly, anti-secular intolerance isn't a concern of many anti-oppression organizations.

What makes anti-secular oppression unique is the widespread and nearly universal blindness towards it. There is a growing body of academic research that examines discrimination against non-believers, including secular students, and this research discusses the needs of secular students at length. With all that we have learned in the last 10-15 years about anti-secular intolerance, coupled with the well-documented history of minority group treatment in the U.S., I am baffled as to why anti-secular bigotry remains the least recognized, least understood, and least talked about form of oppression.

The bright side to all of this is that it's an exciting time to be a secular student, and organizations like the Secular Student Alliance ([www.secularstudents.org](http://www.secularstudents.org)) continue to experience massive growth year after year. The 2013 launch of the Secular Safe Zone Project ([www.secularsafezone.org](http://www.secularsafezone.org)) received national media attention.

The future of the secular movement is happening now. Secular students aren't tomorrow's leaders, they are today's. If you want your voice to be heard, you're going to have to go out there and shout, and when you do, I sincerely hope it's on my campus.

Be Bright. Be Loud. Be Openly Secular.

*Lori Fazzino, M.A.*

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The information presented in this toolkit is intended to help you navigate being an openly secular student. Think of your high school or college like taking a road trip; you're the driver and this toolkit is Google Maps. You've got the keys and know where to go, but aren't quite sure how to get there. We will provide you with route options and step-by-step directions.

The very practice of being open about who you are promotes tolerance and encourages others to do the same. When more people choose to be open about being secular, a community of love and respect is created, helping to eliminate discrimination. Just remember, being open is different for everyone, and only you can decide what the process looks like for you.

We recognize that being open, especially for those who are under 18, still live at home, and/or rely on financial help from family, may not be an option right now. We strongly suggest taking the time to consider your personal situation and encourage you not to be open until you feel that it's safe and you're ready. Be safe. Be sure. Then be open.

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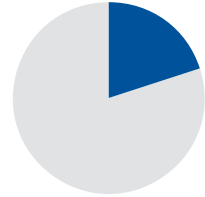
## INTRODUCTION

The number of Americans who do not identify with religion continues to grow. The unaffiliated population in the previous five years increased from over 15% to just under 20%. In 2012, Pew Research found one-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.

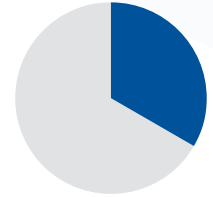
In 2013, findings from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) indicated that almost one-third (28%) of university students can be classified as secular. Among this group, 42% stated the belief that god does not exist, with another 35% who said they didn't know and can't know whether god exists.

These respondents hold progressive views on social issues like female reproductive rights and assisted suicide, are more likely to be politically liberal, and reject the idea that atheists have less chance to succeed. If the population of secular students continues to grow, it is safe to assume that there will be implications for what goes on in the classroom and on campus. We can't overstate the importance of watching how academic institutions respond to this changing dynamic.

## AMONG US CITIZENS

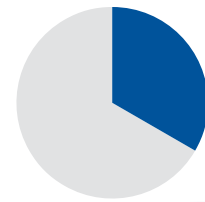


**20%**  
Religiously unaffiliated

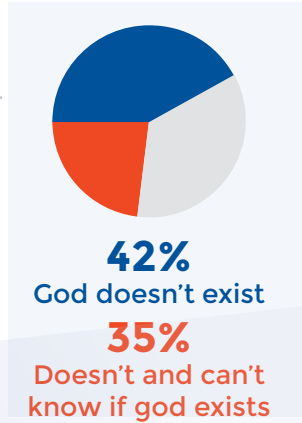


**33%**  
Adults under 30  
religiously unaffiliated

## AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS



**28%**  
University students  
classified as secular



**42%**  
God doesn't exist  
**35%**  
Doesn't and can't  
know if god exists

## LET'S JUST BE HONEST

The most obvious challenge that secular students encounter is the stigma they face for their nonreligious lifestyles. So let's start there; stigma against secular students.

### Q. What is Stigma?

A. "Stigma" refers to negative attitudes people hold toward others whom they deem "different" than themselves. It is manifested in prejudicial and discriminatory behaviors such as bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, intolerance, and/or avoidance.

### Q. Who Does Stigma Hurt?

A. Stigma affects those stigmatized, and prejudice and discrimination affect all levels of society. Racial/ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTQ persons have spoken out to end their oppression. While members of these groups continue to confront social stigma, the stigmatization of two groups - transgender and secular communities - is still generally seen as acceptable.

### Q. Why Does Stigma Exist?

A. Sociologist Erving Goffman describes stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting." The person with the attribute is "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one."

### Q. Who Stigmatizes?

A. All of us are guilty of some form of stigmatization, whether we do it consciously or unconsciously. Media portrayals can create, perpetuate, and reflect stigma. Media reinforces negative stereotypes that portray oppressed groups as blameworthy, dangerous or funny.

### Q. How Does Stigma Hurt?

A. Stigma isn't just hurting people's feelings. Stigma can negatively affect social participation and mental health, cause substance abuse, and jeopardize work, school, family, and peer commitments. People who experience stigma often talk about feelings of shame, anxiety, frustration, depression, helplessness, fear and hurt.

# SOCIAL STIGMA AND BEING OPEN

While deciding to be open is an important step towards living an authentic and honest life, for many people it's a difficult decision to make.

The majority of secular people are aware of the negative ways they are perceived. Some choose to live openly while others view concealment as their only option. Despite the growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated adults, being fully open often incurs social costs, such as:

## Types of Religious Anti-Secular Intolerance Experienced by Secular Individuals

- 🌀 Verbal Harassment
- 🌀 Social Ostracism
- 🌀 Invalidation
- 🌀 Stereotyping/Slander
- 🌀 Being "Outed"
- 🌀 Proselytization

A 2011 study found that repeated exposure to stereotypes, when stigma was visible, lead to greater resilience against them. This is encouraging, but the greatest predictor of the ability to combat stigma and the repercussions of stigmatization is the presence of a supportive social network.

If you have supportive family and friends who or are willing to cultivate new relationships with like-minded people, and who will give you support and validation, you will find it easier to be open and confident about who you are.



## MEANING IS EVERYTHING

A person who views their choice to live openly secular as a type of activism is more likely to feel empowered. Empowerment can act as a shield against the negative effects of stigmatization. We value knowledge as power, and thus have provided some information on navigating high school (and college!) for secular and non secular students alike.



For more information on the process of becoming open, visit our website at:

[www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits)

# A SECULAR PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT'S BILL OF RIGHTS

As a secular high school student, you have rights that are constitutionally protected. You have the right to:

1. An educational environment free of religious proselytizing, promotion, or bias from school employees.
2. Be free of school-sponsored religious rituals, including prayer at school functions, whether conducted by staff, students, or outsiders.
3. Free speech on campus, in accordance with school policies that apply equally to all students.
4. Form a secular student group, such as a Secular Student Alliance, if your school allows extra-curricular student groups.
5. Organize your student group without intimidation, undue interference and burdens, or requirements unique to your group.
6. Affiliate with a national organization like the Secular Student Alliance.
7. Be treated the same as all other student groups regarding advertising, publicity, funding, programming, and all other privileges and activities.
8. Have the administration evaluate you or your group based upon your actions and intended actions; not fear, prejudice, or how others might respond to those actions.
9. Complain to your school or contact the media about violations of any of these rights.
10. Seek legal recourse, including from national groups like the Freedom From Religion Foundation, if your school violates any of these rights.



For more information on each of these rights and examples of common violations, visit the Secular Student Alliance at: [www.secularstudents.org/billofrights](http://www.secularstudents.org/billofrights)

## STARTING AN SSA HIGH SCHOOL AFFILIATE GROUP

If you attend school with others who are secular like you, and your school doesn't already have one, consider starting a student group! Here is the basic process for starting a secular group in your high school:

1. Request a group-starting packet from the Secular Student Alliance.
2. Find out what your school's rules are for starting a new student group. Obtain a copy of these rules and send them to your SSA campus organizer.
3. Begin satisfying your school's requirements while you wait for the group-starting packet to arrive.

If you are worried that your administration may try to hinder the formation of a secular club, take precautions. The more tangible the paper trail, the more the SSA will be able to help you. There are a few things for which you should be on the lookout:

- 🌀 Your school taking an excessively long time to approve the group.
- 🌀 Requiring you to follow policies such as a minimum member requirement.
- 🌀 Allowing the club, but not giving recognition. When you are given the green light to officially meet, what your group does is up to you.

**If your group experiences any administrative resistance, contact SSA immediately.**



**High School Church/State Issues:**

[www.secularstudents.org/legalhelp](http://www.secularstudents.org/legalhelp)

**Affiliate Services and Group Resources:**

[www.secularstudents.org/services](http://www.secularstudents.org/services)

**For General Inquiries, email:**

[organizer@secularstudents.org](mailto:organizer@secularstudents.org)

## POTENTIAL CHURCH-STATE VIOLATIONS AT YOUR HIGH SCHOOL

If you attend a public high school and believe your school is violating the separation of church and state, there are some steps you should follow to make sure something can be done about it.

- 🌀 **Contact the SSA** and speak with a campus organizer to determine the best course of action to take. If they can't settle the dispute in your favor and the need for legal intervention arises, they'll put you in contact with an organization that is equipped to help you.
- 🌀 Keep a journal of everything. Be sure to include dates, times, people involved, and a description of what occurred. Hang on to recordings, pictures, screenshots, emails, texts - everything!
- 🌀 Get support. There is sometimes a tremendous amount of backlash from communities where students have asked their schools to adhere to the separation of church and state. Should that be the case, you will be glad to have friends and supporters by your side.

This is especially important if you attend a high school that includes religious elements at events such as graduation.

Speaking of graduation, read on for information on selecting the right college, living openly at your university, and managing your emotional and social health.

## SELECTING THE RIGHT COLLEGE FOR YOU

Aside from thinking about possible majors, expected course load, and whether or not you can study on the beach, you're going to want to think about what college is a good fit for your current or potential secular needs.

Understanding institutional culture and policies is an important first step. Most colleges and universities have discrimination policies and diversity statements listed on their website. Although most of these statements include the word "religion," it can get confusing when secular students aren't explicitly referred to, and if it's not known whether the administration extends religious protections to a non-religious group.

Search University websites for:

-  Mission Statement
-  Official University Statements
-  Discrimination Policy
-  Lifestyle Statements

### A Word on Lifestyle Statements

Mandated signing of lifestyle/morality statements is typically only practiced at religiously-affiliated schools, and you're probably thinking, "Why would I want to go to a school like that?" The short answer: Because you might want to. These schools are typically private liberal arts schools with fantastic reputations and excellent professors. A few Secular Student Alliance alums have come from these schools. You should be aware of these statements when you're searching for the right school. Not all schools have them. But here are a few links to statements from different schools:

#### Southwest Baptist University:

[sbuniv.edu/global/PrinciplesandExpectations.pdf](http://sbuniv.edu/global/PrinciplesandExpectations.pdf)

#### George Fox University:

[georgefox.edu/offices/hr/lifestyle-statement.html](http://georgefox.edu/offices/hr/lifestyle-statement.html)

#### Seattle Pacific University:

[spu.edu/depts/studentlife/LifestyleExpectations.htm](http://spu.edu/depts/studentlife/LifestyleExpectations.htm)

If you go to a private religious college and there isn't an SSA campus group, start one. It's not impossible to start an SSA group at these types of schools.



**Climate Survey:** Examines perceptions of, and attitudes about, the campus climate.

The Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) has a nation-wide climate survey that determines the religious and spiritual climate of campuses. Many schools that don't participate in IFYC surveys, but who assess their campuses, often fail to include religion as a component.

The Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey (CRSCS) examines religious and secular group experiences on campus by measuring:

- 🌀 Religious literacy among students
- 🌀 Interactions between students from different religious and secular backgrounds
- 🌀 Students' perceptions of religious diversity on campus
- 🌀 Ways students engage religious diversity through co-curricular activities

## **Researching Campus Climate: Religious Diversity & Secular Prevalence Campus Climate**

- 🌀 Does the administration assess campus climate?
- 🌀 Do they participate in the CRSCS?

### **Student Organizations**

- 🌀 What's the ratio of religious to secular student organizations?
- 🌀 Is there an established SSA affiliate group?

### **Campus Programs, Forums, and Speakers**

- 🌀 Are there university-sponsored forums that focus on secularism or non-belief?
- 🌀 Have openly non-theist speakers given talks on campus?
- 🌀 Are secular perspectives included in campus interfaith efforts?

### **Class Programming**

- 🌀 Do they have a religious studies program?
- 🌀 Are classes on secularism offered?

### **Secular Resources**

- 🌀 Is there a Secular Safe Zone on campus?
- 🌀 Are there scholarships available specifically for secular students?

If you're interested in pursuing a degree in secular studies, there are just a few institutions currently offering that programming. For a list of these programs, visit the Nonreligious and Secularity Research Network at:

[www.nsrn.net/resources/for-students](http://www.nsrn.net/resources/for-students)

## BECOMING OPEN IN COLLEGE

Adjusting to college can be a difficult process for anyone, and can become increasingly complicated if you are struggling to accept and/or be open about who you are. Everything we believe, value, and hold important is often challenged by new information. Wrestling with new ideas is precisely what we must do in order to really examine our worldview from a critical perspective. During this time, students develop their sense of identity, as pre-college beliefs are reinforced, altered, or completely rejected.

This challenge can be simultaneously liberating and stressful, and may also be impacted by factors such as race, gender, culture, sexuality, financial stability, access to resources, allies, etc.

Visit [www.openlysecular.org/toolkits](http://www.openlysecular.org/toolkits) for a variety of resources that help with the process of being open.

### **Want to start a Secular Student Alliance affiliate group at your school?**

Starting a Secular Student Alliance affiliate is a great way to ensure a safe space for secular students. If you're interested in assisting students in starting an affiliate group, please visit:

[www.secularstudents.org/groupstartingpacket](http://www.secularstudents.org/groupstartingpacket) to learn more and request a group starting packet.

## STRESS CHECK

While some degree of stress is often associated with the transition to college, too much stress can lead to unhealthy and potentially serious physical and emotional consequences.

If any of these warning signs persist over a series of weeks or interfere with you or a friend's ability to function, it's important to reach out for help.

- ⊗ Changes in sleep patterns (taking longer to fall asleep, waking up tired, not feeling well rested)
- ⊗ Changes in eating patterns
- ⊗ Increased frequency of headaches
- ⊗ More short-tempered than usual
- ⊗ Recurring colds and minor illnesses
- ⊗ Frequent muscle ache and/or tightness
- ⊗ Increase in disorganization
- ⊗ Increased difficulty in task completion
- ⊗ A greater sense of persistent time pressure
- ⊗ Increased generalized frustration and anger

## HANDLING HATE-MONGERING PREACHERS ON CAMPUS

Many campuses have a dedicated “free speech” zone, and while we’re all for free speech, sometimes the hateful preachers who take advantage of these spaces are almost too much to take. We understand! Below are some strategies to use when encountering religious hate speech:

- Just ignore them. You’re late for class anyway, aren’t you?
- Gather members of your SSA group and build a human wall in front of the individual so that others can’t hear the hate mongering.
- Track their schedule. If you see patterns of regularly-scheduled times these individuals show up on campus, plan an event during the same time, and right next to them.
- Actually engage...seriously, if you can. The best offense is a good defense. It might be worth chatting with this person if you have a spare 10 minutes. See if anything has changed in the message.
- Use the opportunity to raise money for a charity that is associated with whatever group is being targeted (if it’s atheists, sweet! Collect money for your SSA bank account). Everytime the individual uses a hate-mongering term, pledgers donate a dollar.
- Counteract hateful messages with a positive campaign. You can use one of the ideas provided below or be creative and create your own!

**Campus Hate Preacher Bingo:** [www.secularstudents.org/bingo](http://www.secularstudents.org/bingo)

**Hug an Atheist:** [www.secularstudents.org/node/2553](http://www.secularstudents.org/node/2553)

**Stone-a-Heathen for Charity:** [www.secularstudents.org/stone-a-heathen](http://www.secularstudents.org/stone-a-heathen)

**Send an Atheist to Church:** [www.secularstudents.org/sendatheistchurch](http://www.secularstudents.org/sendatheistchurch)

**Whatever you decided to do, DO NOT touch any of these haters. Some of these groups fund themselves by instigating physical retaliation and suing for damages.**



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Being an openly secular student can be very empowering. While there are risks, there are extremely rewarding benefits as well. You have the chance to make a difference on your campus and in your community. Until more people openly identify as secular, we'll be fighting anti-secular intolerance. We encourage you to be brave and open. We suggest that you monitor your stress, manage your physical, mental, and emotional health, and speak out about your secular beliefs when the time is right.

Take it from me (an openly atheist sociology professor!), that when you speak out about who you are in ways that are respectful, you should not feel like you have to hide, you are not being offensive to your religious classmates, and you contribute to a necessary dialogue.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Organizations

There are a number of organizations that can serve as resources for you. This first section explores organizations based around a secular worldview or organizations that offer specific services to secular students.

#### Secular Student Alliance (SSA)

The Secular Student Alliance is an educational nonprofit that works to organize and empower nonreligious students across the country. Their affiliate program fosters successful grassroots campus groups which provide a welcoming community for secular students to discuss their views and promote secular values. Any student, part of an affiliate group or not, can receive support and resources as a member of the SSA.

[www.secularstudents.org](http://www.secularstudents.org)

#### Secular Safe Zone (SSZ)

The Secular Safe Zone is a project of the Secular Student Alliance. The SSZ seeks to train educators and others in order to give secular or questioning students a safe mentor or role model to speak to about the hardships facing nontheists in their environment. It also seeks to challenge prejudice and to foster a world in which secular students are free of discrimination.

[www.secularsafezone.org](http://www.secularsafezone.org)

#### American Humanist Association (AHA)

The American Humanist Association is a national organization founded in 1941 to promote humanism in the United States. The AHA represents both secular and religious naturalistic humanism, and cooperates with other national and international humanist organizations to advance the ideals of humanism.

[www.americanhumanist.org](http://www.americanhumanist.org)

### **Camp Quest**

Camp Quest is a network of secular summer camps for the children of atheists, humanists, and other freethinkers. Many college students volunteer as counselors at week-long Camp Quest sessions.

[www.camp-quest.org](http://www.camp-quest.org)

### **Center for Inquiry (CFI)**

The Center for Inquiry International is a nonprofit educational organization working to promote and defend science, reason, and freedom of inquiry in all areas of human endeavor. It is also the parent organization of CFI On Campus, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH).

[www.centerforinquiry.net](http://www.centerforinquiry.net)

### **Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF)**

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a membership organization for freethinkers - atheists, agnostics, secularists, humanists, and rationalists. The Foundation acts as an umbrella for those free from religion, and is committed to the treasured principle of separation of church and state.

[www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org)

### **Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)**

The mission of FIRE is to defend and sustain individual rights at America's colleges and universities, including freedom of speech, legal equality, due process, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience.

[www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org)

### **Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)**

The Interfaith Youth Core is an organization working to bring young people of all worldviews together to strengthen social cohesion, build social capital, and address social problems. While the Secular Student Alliance encourages its affiliates to participate in interfaith work, SSA stresses the importance of retaining a non-theistic identity as well as being openly skeptical of supernatural claims.

[www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)

### **Society for Humanistic Judaism**

Humanistic Judaism embraces a human-centered philosophy that combines the celebration of Jewish culture and identity with an adherence to humanistic values and ideas.

[www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org)

### **James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF)**

The JREF promotes critical thinking by reaching out to the public and media with reliable information about paranormal and supernatural claims. They also provide educational materials to help teach critical thinking and science.

[www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org)

### **Americans United for the Separation of Church and State**

Since 1947, Americans United has worked to protect the constitutional principle of church-state separation, a vital cornerstone of religious liberty. Americans of many faiths and political viewpoints and from all walks of life, come together to defend freedoms.

[www.au.org](http://www.au.org)

### **Information on Religious Freedom, Bullying and Hate Crimes**

#### **Cyberbullying**

This National Conference of State Legislatures provides short summaries of laws on cyberbullying, as well as links to the full-text acts, for each state.

[www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/cyberbullying.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/cyberbullying.aspx)

#### **Cyber-harassment and Cyberstalking**

This National Conference of State Legislatures provides short summaries of laws on cyber-harassment and cyberstalking, as well as links to the full-text acts, for each state.

[www.ncsl.org/issues-research/telecom/cyberstalking-and-cyberharassment-laws.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/telecom/cyberstalking-and-cyberharassment-laws.aspx)

#### **Freedom of Religion**

Freedom of religion is guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, through the Free Exercise Clause.

[www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill\\_of\\_rights\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html)



## Hate Crimes

The Anti-Defamation League provides a map of the U.S. where you can click on your state to see relevant statutes on hate crimes (note: general information is provided in each state webpage; there will be a link in the lower right-hand corner to more information on hate crime laws in that state).

[www.archive.adl.org/learn/hate\\_crimes\\_laws/map\\_frameset.html](http://www.archive.adl.org/learn/hate_crimes_laws/map_frameset.html)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provides a comprehensive overview of hate crimes in the United States and information on how to report a hate crime.

[www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate\\_crimes](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate_crimes)

## Religious Discrimination and Related Crimes

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provides a list and descriptions of federal civil rights statutes which are relevant to religious discrimination and crimes against people based on their religion.

[www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/federal-statutes](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/federal-statutes)



## ATHEISTS IN INTERFAITH: OUR PLACE AT THE TABLE

“Interfaith” has become a major priority on many campuses. Organizations are springing up to promote it, colleges and universities are embracing it, even the White House is reaching out to get involved. But there’s still plenty of confusion out there as to what interfaith is, and even more confusion from the nontheistic perspective.

In October 2010, I attended an Interfaith Leadership Institute hosted by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) as a “campus ally.” This opportunity to participate in a two-day interfaith program helped me to understand exactly what this movement is and how we, as people with secular worldviews, fit into it.

Interfaith is a rising trend, particularly on college campuses. It brings together individuals of differing worldviews (not just religious or theistic) to set aside their differences in order to accomplish shared goals. In many ways, the interfaith movement is tapping into people’s religious traditions to get them involved in activities that look a lot like real, secular pluralism.

There are a lot of misconceptions about what interfaith programs are and are not. In the experiences I’ve had, interfaith is often an effort toward pluralism, setting aside our differences and trying to understand one another. It’s an effort to bring people together for social action or service projects.

We can also make a list of what interfaith is not. Interfaith is absolutely not an opportunity for anyone to proselytize one another - from one religion to another, religious to nonreligious, or nonreligious to religious. And while we may set aside our differences, interfaith isn’t trying to pretend that we don’t have differences. It is not an effort to give religion a special place in society or on campus, nor is it an effort to make everyone the same.

As nonbelievers, getting involved in interfaith has some awesome features. It’s a great opportunity for large-scale service projects, and it can help make nontheists more visible. It’s a chance to demonstrate that we can be “good without God.” On campus, interfaith programs can mean opportunities for representation or access to special funding or facilities. Last but not least, participation in interfaith programs

can build relationships that help facilitate times when conflict does arise.

But as with anything, there are some downsides. It can be hard for a brazen nontheist to set aside the need to question and challenge religion. Because of the name “interfaith,” outsiders might think that atheism is just another religion. Some interfaith programs aren’t as welcoming to nontheists as others, and sometimes they may require limiting or uncomfortable “mutual respect” agreements. Sometimes these are challenges to overcome and opportunities to educate our communities about nontheism; other times, there may be reasons to decline participation in an interfaith program. Every nontheist and every group is different and will have to decide based on their own circumstances whether interfaith participation is right for them.

Despite these drawbacks, I still encourage nontheists to participate in interfaith programs. Be prepared, though, because certain situations are very likely to come up. Language is the biggest area to be prepared for. Interfaith programs are still figuring out that “people of all religions” doesn’t cover everyone,

and sometimes you’ll hear people using words like “spirituality.” Generally speaking, take it in the spirit it was meant: most of the time, language like this is a result of people and programs working to establish new ways of discussing a variety of worldviews and identities, and it is not meant to exclude or insult anyone.

Likewise, it’s very common to encounter misconceptions and stereotypes about nonbelievers. Sometimes a group may face outright discrimination from an interfaith program. These situations can be handled through preparation and patience - and admittedly these problems aren’t limited to the realm of interfaith.

With theists and nontheists both working to reach out to one another, we can’t help but make a difference in the world. And that’s something to get excited about!

*Written by Lyz Liddell, Director of Campus Organizing for the Secular Student Alliance.*

**To read the full article, visit:**  
[foundationbeyondbelief.org/resources/pdfs/Atheists\\_in\\_Interfaith.pdf](https://foundationbeyondbelief.org/resources/pdfs/Atheists_in_Interfaith.pdf)



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