

Jewish College Students in America

A Report to the Jim Joseph Foundation

BY
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Executive Summary

In January 2022, the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned a study of Jewish college students. Working with the foundation as well as with a survey research and analytics firm, College Pulse, I designed a study to capture the attitudes and behaviors of today's four-year college students. The study includes a national survey of 2,000 Jewish undergraduates, plus a comparison survey of 1,000 non-Jewish undergraduates. In addition to the 35-question survey, the study includes five focus groups of students enrolled at the following universities: SUNY Binghamton, Ohio State, UC Santa Cruz, University of Chicago, and Tulane University.

The goal of the study is to examine who Jewish students are, what drives them and motivates them, where they find connection and meaning, and how being Jewish does or does not play in their college lives. The study answers questions such as: How connected do Jewish students feel to Jewish life on campus? What do they want out of their Jewish experiences? To what extent does the campus political climate affect their engagement with Jewish life? The study places special emphasis on the large share of Jewish-identifying students who have little to no interaction with organized Jewish life.

Here are eleven takeaways from the report:

1. Jewish students come from diverse backgrounds. About half of the students surveyed grew up in a household with one Jewish parent. About half celebrate both Jewish and non-Jewish customs and holidays. While 76% of Jewish students identify as ethnically Jewish, fewer than half (43%) identify as Jewish "from a religious perspective."
2. Most Jewish students consider their Jewish identity to be important to them (75% said it is

somewhat or very important). Nearly as many (70%) think positively about the Jewish experiences they had growing up, and most (60%) said they want to explore Jewish aspects of their identity while in college. However, most do not regularly participate in campus Jewish activities (only 34% attend programs more than a few times a year). Furthermore, when thinking about life post-college, only about a quarter of them consider it important to have a Jewish family or to participate as a member of a religious/spiritual community. Even among those who feel very close to a Jewish community while in college, most (54%) do not consider it important to them that they are a member of a religious/spiritual community after college.

3. The Jewish students, particularly those from more traditional Jewish backgrounds, tend to come from upper class or upper-middle class families. They spend significantly less time in college working to earn money than non-Jewish students. As a result, they have more free time. Their extra time is spent mainly on informal socializing.
4. The Jewish students in the sample are over three times more likely than the non-Jewish students to say that their “religious/racial/ethnic group’s community on campus” was an important factor when they decided where to apply to college. The Jewish students are also 60% more likely to say they are interested in exploring religion and culture while in college (both their own culture and other people’s) compared to non-Jewish students.
5. Just over half of the Jewish students attend Jewish events on campus at least a few times a year. Of those who have had interactions with the Jewish community on their campus, their experiences have been overwhelmingly positive: 85% say that attending Jewish activities makes them feel like they belong somewhere. For the few who feel uncomfortable, the reasons range from feeling excluded from social cliques to having a limited background in religious education to

feeling unwelcome due to the dominant political worldview of the active participants.

6. A student’s family background characteristics as well as their personal attitudes toward being Jewish are strong predictors of their participation in Jewish activities on campus. However, their *affect* (e.g., how much they care about their Jewish identity) is a much stronger predictor than their background traits (e.g., whether their family engaged in many Jewish practices when they were growing up). A student who grew up with limited exposure to Jewish practice but identifies strongly as Jewish is more likely to be attending programs on campus than a student who had substantial childhood exposure to Jewish practice but does not identify strongly with being Jewish.
7. One third of the students say that a Jewish professional on campus (e.g., Hillel rabbi, Chabad rabbi, Hillel staff) knows them by name. About a third of students wish they had a stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. These students include those who are already known by a Jewish professional but want a stronger relationship, as well as those who are not yet known by a Jewish professional but would like a relationship. The students who have a greater affinity to their Jewish identity and who grew up in households that tended to observe Jewish practices are the ones who most desire deeper relationships with Jewish mentors on campus.
8. When asked what kind of Jewish programming they want, the most popular genres are social, cultural, and Shabbat/holiday programming. Students from more traditional Jewish backgrounds are uniformly more interested in every kind of programming idea that was suggested to them compared to less traditional students, whether the programs were about learning and prayer or about interfaith connections or career planning or politics or meditation.

9. Most Jewish students (56%) worry that people make unfair judgements about them because they are Jewish. Nearly one in four say people will judge them negatively for attending Jewish programs on campus. One in five feel the need to hide they are Jewish in order to fit in. In general, however, the students do not fear antisemitism. To the extent that they fear antisemitism, it motivates more of them to participate in Jewish life than it keeps them away.
10. Most Jewish students (54%) feel that they pay a social cost for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (i.e., not any specific policy but just the right for the country to exist). The non-Jewish sample corroborates these fears. They were asked if they agreed with the statement, “I wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.” About half said “I don’t know” rather than answering the question. Of those who answered yes or no, 13% said yes, and on the campuses with the most Jewish students in the sample, closer to one in five non-Jewish students agreed with the statement. Even among the Jewish students who believe Israel should not exist as a Jewish state, nearly half agreed that Jewish students pay a social cost if they do support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
11. While campuses are home to Jewish students who do and do not support the existence of a Jewish state (the Jewish sample is 3-to-1 supportive of Israel’s right to exist, and the ratio is higher among students engaged in Jewish life), students are, on balance, satisfied with their campus Jewish community’s relationship to Israel. The engaged students are somewhat more likely to feel the community isn’t supportive enough of Israel. The less engaged students are somewhat more likely to feel the community is too supportive of Israel. But the overall picture is one of satisfaction with how the community handles the issue.

While readers will draw a variety of conclusions from these data, a few conclusions stand out to me:

First, for organizations looking to impact the Jewish lives of students, there is a world of opportunity. The majority of Jewish students, no matter their backgrounds, say that they care about their Jewish identities and that they want to learn more about being Jewish. For instance, the majority of students who grew up with one Jewish parent report that it is somewhat/very important that they explore their Jewish identity while in college. However, most of them are not channeling those feelings into concrete forms of participation in Jewish communities or into deep relationships with Jewish mentors and friends. (Of those with one Jewish parent, most say they have seldom/never attended a Jewish program.) Their expressed interest in Jewish identity leaves open the potential for deeper engagement.

Given the differences in background between the students who know little about being Jewish and do not attend programs versus students who know a lot about their Jewish identities and are active participants in Jewish activities, the less-traditional students probably need an entirely different kind of Jewish programming experience than the traditional students need.

Second, the college students who come from traditional Jewish backgrounds want *even more* from their Jewish college experience. They want stronger relationships with Jewish mentors. They are enthusiastic about a range of programming ideas. Students who were most Jewishly engaged when they were growing up do not want to set aside that background when they arrive at college. On the contrary, they, more than anyone, are looking for communities and mentors with whom they can further develop their relationship to Judaism.

Third, the political climate around Israel affects a large share of today’s Jewish students. This study shows that simply supporting the existence of a Jewish state in Israel impacts a student’s social relationships on campus. Students who are Jewish and non-Jewish, and students who support and oppose Israel, acknowledge

this predicament. Jewish students feel they are being judged by others because they are Jewish. Jewish organizations are right to be concerned about campus climate issues, as they affect a substantial share of the Jewish student population.

Introduction

College is a major turning point in a young adult's life. The friends they make, the classes they take, and the mentors they acquire can affect students' long-term trajectories. For Jewish college students, involvement in Jewish life on campus can influence their Jewish identities and their religious and cultural engagement through adulthood.

Jewish communal organizations want to engage students and deepen the students' relationships with Judaism and with the Jewish community. Organizations want to know: What do the students want out of their college experience? How can Jewish leaders connect to them? What Jewish programs, activities, and relationships can enrich students' lives?

Jewish organizations on campus must engage a broad range of students. Rather than encountering groups of students who are already comfortably embedded in Jewish social networks, campus community-building often starts from scratch: campus organizations are tasked with creating, rather than simply reinforcing, a sense of shared identity. Programming that is designed for students with more traditional backgrounds can perpetuate a feeling among less traditional students that Jewish life on campus is meant only for those who are "more Jewish" than they are.²

In general, fewer Americans today, and fewer young people especially, are seeking to place themselves in religious communities or find meaning in their life through religion.³ To the extent that they turn to religion, students are picking activities *a la carte*,⁴ increasingly choosing the more individualized aspects of religion rather than the communal and

traditional aspects.⁵ Religious organizations are not a popular outlet for building community or cultivating personal growth. Jewish organizations on campus are thus countercultural, pushing against prevailing norms. Since most Jewish students are not flocking to organized religion, it falls upon Jewish organizations, volunteer leaders, and professionals on campus to seek out students and demonstrate the value of their programming.⁶

Yet another challenge for Jewish organizations is that the political climate on college campuses can create a barrier to Jewish engagement. The current generation of college students is overwhelmingly liberal. Young liberals, today, believe that the state of Israel is an adversary.⁷ A Jewish student who affirms that a Jewish state should exist faces social penalties on campus. Jewish students who do not have deep knowledge or firm opinions about Israel may feel that participating in Jewish life is politically or socially "complicated," and thus not worth it.

Jewish college students themselves are more critical of Israel than their older counterparts.⁸ Jewish organizations walk a fine line if they want to create space for connecting to Israel on campus while also welcoming students who oppose a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

In this new study – a survey of 2,000 Jewish college students and in-depth focus groups with twenty-five of those students – the primary goal is to examine what students want from their college experiences and how Jewish activities might fit into their lives on campus. The survey paints a picture of Jewish college students, illustrating their many backgrounds and life goals. It allows us to answer questions, such as: Who are these students? How do they spend their time? How do they *want* to spend their time? Where in their lives do they derive meaning? Why do or don't they participate in Jewish activities on campus?

The research sheds special light on the large share of Jewish students who are not involved in campus Jewish communities. For some of these students, particularly

those who have no background in Jewish education and no knowledge of any Jewish community, there is a sharp disconnect between their interest in, and positive feelings towards, their Jewish identity and their lack of engagement in Jewish activities on campus.

The study also explores the ways that campus political climates affect students' attitudes towards Jewish life on campus. The research finds a widespread belief among Jewish college students that people judge them for being Jewish and that they pay a social cost for supporting the very existence of a Jewish state in the land of Israel. For students who are already ambivalent about participating in Jewish programs and events, the political climate and fear of being judged may keep them from ever attending a Jewish activity.

This study builds on past research while expanding our understanding of today's Jewish college students. Other studies have noted that many Jewish college students are moving away from religion.⁹ With focus groups, detailed survey questions, and open-ended responses, this study helps convey rich new details about how these non-religious students think about being Jewish. Past studies have investigated students who have applied to Birthright or who have attended a program with Chabad or Hillel. By interviewing students on every kind of campus, including campuses with few Jews, and by interviewing many students who have never expressed any interest in Jewish activities, the present study builds on past work by addressing the large cohort of students who infrequently/never attend Jewish programs on campus.¹⁰

Methodology

This study was done through the leading firm that surveys students, called College Pulse. College Pulse data has been leveraged by other foundations, such as the Knight Foundation and the Gates Foundation. The College Pulse panel has also been specifically used to sample Jewish students by Hillel and the Anti-Defamation League.¹¹

The survey was fielded online in April of 2022, drawn from College Pulse's *American College Student Panel*TM that includes over 650,000 verified students representing more than 1,500 different colleges and universities in all 50 states. From this pool of 650,000, College Pulse periodically invites students to participate in surveys, in exchange for awards such as gift certificates. The students mainly fill out the surveys on their mobile phones.

College Pulse invites students to be part of its panel (and therefore eligible to take surveys) through advertising and through partnerships with campus organizations. Importantly for this study, College Pulse does not have partnerships with Jewish campus organizations (e.g., Hillel) through which contact information is shared. All else equal, a student who is involved in a Jewish campus organization is no more likely or less likely to be solicited to participate in the survey than a student who is uninvolved in a Jewish organization. This is important because I sought a sample of students that was not drawn from a population that had already opted into Jewish activities on campus.

For this study, I sought a sample of 2,000 Jewish students and a comparison sample of 1,000 non-Jewish students. The non-Jewish sample is weighted (using information from Census surveys and other representative surveys) to be approximately representative of the overall population of college students.

In order for the Jewish sample to be representative of a true population, one would have to know information about the true population, such as from a census. However, very little is known about the true population characteristics of Jewish-identifying college students. Accordingly, it is not possible to fully evaluate whether the sample is representative. However, based on how the College Pulse panel is formed, the Jewish sample is likely to capture the diversity of Jewish students across four-year US college campuses in the same way as College Pulse captures the general population of students. As noted below, on several demographics, such as race, sexual orientation, interfaith families, and political party affiliation, the sample characteristics align closely with the 18-29 year old sample in Pew's "Jewish Americans in 2020" study. The young adult sample collected by Pew is the closest benchmark available to gauge the representativeness of the College Pulse sample.

The surveying was done in stages. In the first stage, College Pulse solicited students from its general pool of 650,000 current college students. Respondents were shown a "Screener" question, asking if they identified as Jewish in one or more of the following ways: spiritually, culturally, ethnically, or religiously. Respondents who reported they did not identify as Jewish in any way were filtered into the non-Jewish questionnaire. Respondents who identified as Jewish in one or more ways were filtered into the Jewish questionnaire. This method was used until College Pulse interviewed the full sample of non-Jewish students. In total, there are 1,029 students in the non-Jewish sample.

Next, College Pulse targeted its solicitations in order to increase the interviews with Jewish students. To do this, College Pulse used two strategies. First, some students who had previously taken College Pulse surveys had indicated that they identified their religion as Jewish. These students were solicited to take the survey.

Second, for students who attend colleges with large Jewish populations, College Pulse targeted students who did not identify as any religion or had not yet been asked a religion question. All these students were shown the Screener question in which they could select one or more ways they identified as Jewish. In total, 2,095 students were interviewed who identified as Jewish in one or more ways.

In May of 2022, twenty-five of the Jewish survey respondents participated in one of five focus group sessions led by College Pulse. The hour-long sessions were conducted on Zoom with five students each from SUNY Binghamton, Ohio State, UC Santa Cruz, University of Chicago, and Tulane University. One session included only students who participate regularly in Jewish programming on their campus. Another session included students who participate infrequently (e.g., once or twice a year). A third session included students who have never participated in Jewish activities. The remaining two sessions included a mix of students.

The focus group script asked students to reflect on their own background and identity, their feelings of connectedness to Jewish community on campus, and their evaluation of Jewish programming on campus. The students were also invited to reflect on how perspectives about Israel affect their campus experiences.

Throughout this report, I will share comments from focus group participants that offer a window into how students are thinking about life on campus and their Jewish experiences.

Screenener

Jewish identity is complicated and can be defined in different ways. The Screenener question, which filtered students into or out of the Jewish survey, is one way to define identity. The Screenener asked respondents: **Do you identify as Jewish in any of the following ways?** Respondents could answer:

- No, I don't identify as Jewish
- Jewish from a cultural perspective
- Jewish from a spiritual perspective
- Jewish from an ethnic or family heritage perspective
- Jewish from a religious perspective
- Jewish in another way [textbox]

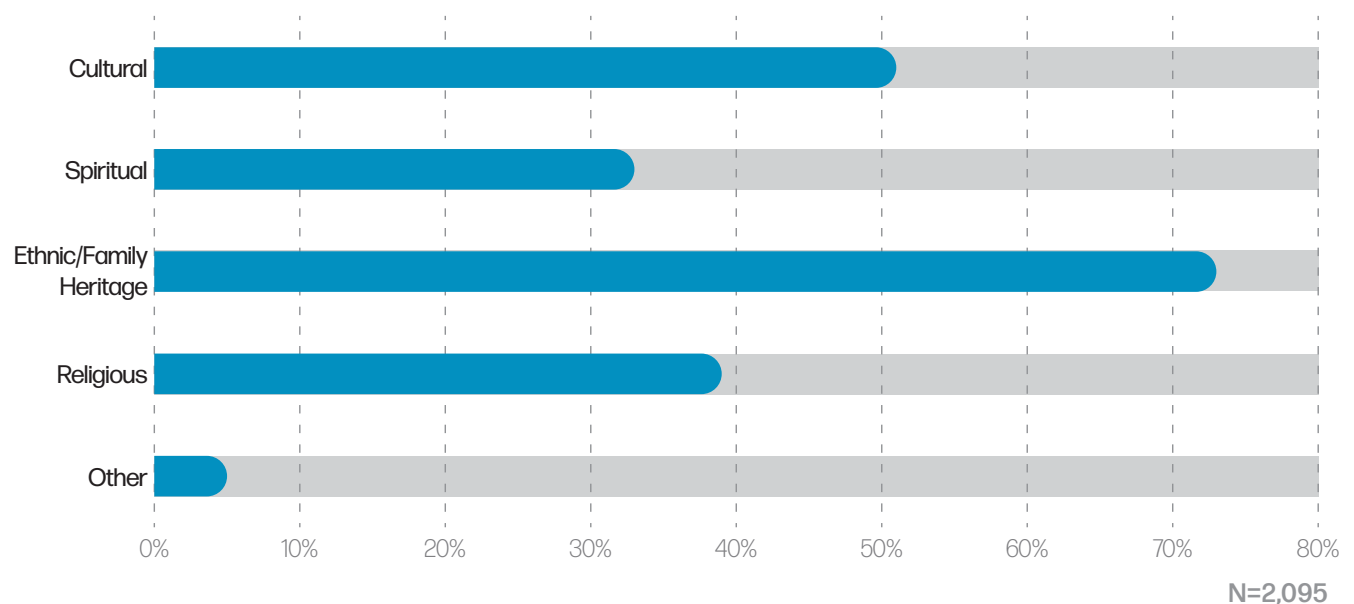
Of those who identified as Jewish at all (N=2,095), the most common form of identity is ethnic/family heritage (73%), followed by cultural (51%), religious (39%), and spiritual (33%). Respondents could select more than one category. Only a small number of respondents (N=66) chose the “other” category while not selecting

any other choice. These individuals offered a range of Jewish connections, such as that they have solidarity with Jewish people, are in the process of conversion, or have a romantic partner who is Jewish. I exclude these respondents from the Jewish sample.

Of all 2,095 Jewish-identifying respondents, about half (53%) checked only one identity, which was typically ethnic/family heritage. Just 381 (18%) selected that they are culturally AND spiritually AND ethnically AND religiously Jewish. As the table (next page) shows, most of those who identify as religiously Jewish also identify as ethnically, culturally, and spiritually Jewish. Similarly, of respondents who identify as spiritually Jewish, most also select the other categories. However, of those who report being ethnically Jewish, only a third identify as spiritually or religiously Jewish.

As part of its demographic battery of questions (asked separately from the present study), College Pulse asks respondents, “What is your present religion, if any?” Of those who identified as one or more of ethnically, culturally, spiritually, or religiously Jewish in the Screenener, about half, 53%, identify their *religion* as Jewish in this separate religion question.¹² About 13% percent identify as agnostic or atheist, 11% identify as nothing, 6% as other, and the remaining 17% identify as

Do you identify as Jewish in any of the following ways?



Then Percent ID as...

If ID as...	ETHNIC	CULTURAL	SPIRITUAL	RELIGIOUS	COUNT
...Ethnic	X	54	32	38	1,521
...Cultural	77	X	47	53	1,061
...Spiritual	70	72	X	62	697
...Religious	72	70	54	X	807

another religion altogether, such as Catholic, Christian, Protestant, or Mormon. In addition, when asked about their Jewish denomination, 3% of the sample (55/2,095) identify as Messianic, which is not typically viewed as a Jewish denomination.

There are several reasons why the students who identify that their present religion is Christian or another non-Jewish religion would also identify as spiritually, ethnically, culturally, or religiously Jewish. Some of these students have Jewish cultural or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, they have a Jewish grandparent with whom they share Jewish holidays but were themselves raised as Christians. Other students may have no family connection to Judaism; however, as part of their own religion, they identify, in part, as religiously or spiritually Jewish. Still others may have no family or religious connection to Judaism but grew up in a neighborhood with Jews or belong to a Jewish fraternity or otherwise feel a sense of cultural affinity.

Some of these atypical identities are described explicitly in open-ended responses (e.g., “Have a mixture of Jewish heritage and religious views, although I am Pentecostal,” “Father is Jewish so I am ethnically, but I am spiritually Christian”). In most cases, it is difficult to discern the circumstances in which a respondent would identify as, say, Christian, but also Jewish. For instance, most of the respondents who identify as Messianic Jews consider themselves ethnically Jewish. It is not clear whether their parents or grandparents were Jews who converted out of Judaism into Messianic identity or whether they consider their Messianic tradition to be part of Jewish ethnicity.

In the analysis below, I restrict the Jewish sample to the 1,721 students who do not primarily identify with another religion and do not identify with Messianic Judaism. The restriction effectively removes 374 students who identify on the Screener question as having some kind of Jewish identity. The Jewish sample I analyze *does* include respondents whose religious identity falls into categories such as “none”, “atheist”, or “agnostic”. It only excludes those who affirmatively identify with a non-Jewish religion.

There are two main justifications for excluding students who identify affirmatively with a non-Jewish religion. First, this criterion is consistent with Pew’s methodology in its 2020 survey of U.S. Jews. Second, campus Jewish organizations are not mainly serving students who, though they may have Jewish heritage, are practicing Pentecostals, spiritually Christian, Jews for Jesus, and so forth.

“For me, being Jewish is just that ancestral sort of history more than anything else.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

“A lot of times, I’m not certain if I should even be calling myself Jewish, because I don’t really feel Jewish enough. I’m very ethnically Jewish, but my family is so far removed from the traditions.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

“Being Jewish means being part of a community and being able to make those connections with other people. I feel like my Jewish identity is less spiritual, but more just like having that community and being surrounded by individuals who share similar values as me.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
FEMALE

Demographics

The true population characteristics of Jewish-identifying college students are unknown. Since there is no central database or census of Jewish students, and a variety of definitions of Jewish identity, there is no single best way to gauge the representativeness of the Jewish sample. However, I can compare the Jewish students in the sample to the approximately 1,000 non-Jewish comparison sample, as well as to other available benchmarks.

Gender. Consistent with well-documented gender gap in higher education, the College Pulse sample skews female.¹³ The Jewish sample is 49% female and 39% male. The remaining 12% identify with categories such as nonbinary (4%), genderqueer/gender fluid (2%), agender (2%), prefer not to say (4%), and unsure (1%). The non-Jewish sample is 56% female and 42% male. The remaining 2.5% identify with nonbinary categories. That is, the Jewish students are almost five times more likely to identify as not male or female.

Race. College Pulse collects race data through a single-choice survey question, where “two or more races” is a category but a respondent may not click multiple response options, such as White and also Black. The Jewish sample is 73% White, 8% two or more races, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 4% Middle Eastern, and 2% Black. (Although the question-wording is slightly different, in Pew’s 2020 study of U.S. Jews, 28% of 18-29 year olds are Jews of Color, the same as in this study.¹⁴) The non-Jewish sample has a lower percentage of students who are White, Middle Eastern, and multiracial, and a higher percentage of students who are Asian, Black, and Hispanic.

Sexual Orientation. On sexual orientation, the Jewish sample is 64% heterosexual/straight, 14% bisexual, and 7% gay/lesbian. The remaining 15% identify in categories such as queer (3%), pansexual (3%), other (2%), unsure (2%), questioning (2%), asexual/aromantic (1%), and fluid (1%). The non-Jewish sample

is more likely to identify as heterosexual (73%). By comparison, in Pew’s 2020 study, 75% of 18-29 year old Jews identified as heterosexual. The difference between the percent heterosexual in Pew versus the percent heterosexual in this study may be a function of the sampling or may reflect true differences between the subset of young adults who are currently in college versus the broader set of 18-29 year olds.

Political Identity. The Jewish sample leans heavily Democratic. Almost three quarters (73%) are Democrats, and the remainder are split evenly between independents and Republicans. This pattern matches what Pew found among 18-29 year olds. The non-Jewish sample also leans heavily Democratic, but less so (62%) than the Jewish sample.

Socio-Economic Background. Just over half of the Jewish sample identifies as upper class or upper-middle class, a third as middle class, and about 15% as working class or lower class. Again, this tracks with Pew’s finding that just over half of U.S. Jewish households have annual income over \$100,000. The non-Jewish sample is considerably lower in socio-economic status, with only 27% identifying as upper or upper-middle class. Half of the Jewish sample reports they are on financial aid, compared to 63% of the non-Jewish sample. A quarter of the Jewish sample attended private or parochial high schools, compared to 16% of the non-Jewish sample.

Geography. The Jewish and non-Jewish samples in College Pulse differ, in expected ways, in the regions where they grew up.¹⁵ The Jewish students are about twice as likely as the non-Jewish students to originate from the mid-Atlantic and from New England, and they are about half as likely to come from the American South.

While the College Pulse sample of Jewish students shows demographic traits that are in tune with what one might expect from analysis of the Pew data on a somewhat similar population (18-29 year olds), it is worth reiterating that the sample here cannot be taken as representative since the true population

characteristics are unknown. As such, how can the data be interpreted? To use party identity as an example, just because 73% of the Jewish sample identifies as Democrats, we cannot confidently assume that 73% of the true population of Jewish identifying college students identifies as Democrats. Maybe the true rate is 65% or maybe it's 80%. However, even if the true rate is unknown, if the Democratic and Republican students in the sample are representative of the Democratic and Republican students in the population, then we can make reasonable inferences about how the two kinds of students differ from one another on measures in the survey, such as their attitudes toward Jewish identity.

Jewish Background and Affect

While the Screener question defines the Jewish sample for the purposes of this study, I endeavored to capture a range of attitudes and background traits that further characterize Jewish identity. I use a battery of five survey questions that capture a student's family background and four questions that capture a student's feelings toward their Jewish identity. From these variables, I create two scales – *Background* and *Affect* – that I use throughout the report.

Conceptually, the difference between the *Background* scale and the *Affect* scale is that the former focuses on traits that parents/guardians chose for the students as children. It captures how students were raised. The *Affect* scale measures feelings and identities that the students have chosen for themselves.

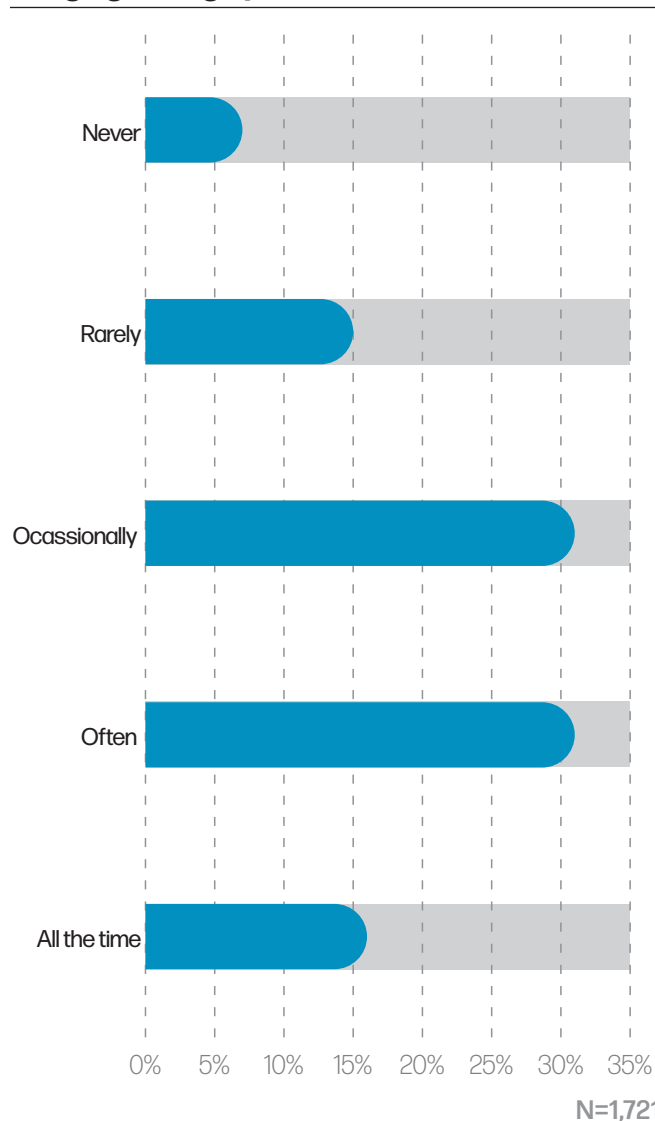
Of course, the varieties of Jewish experience and the nuances of Jewish identity are much more complex

than I can hope to summarize through nine survey questions or a set of scales. Scales like these are imperfect and incomplete. They do not encapsulate all that it means to be Jewish. At the same time, in quantitative analyses like this one, scales are helpful in summarizing relationships between variables. My goal here is not to provide a definitive accounting of Jewish identity among college students, but to transparently show the building-blocks of two useful, but imperfect, scales that help us to analyze survey data.

A. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND JEWISH IDENTITY

BACKGROUND 1

How often would you say you did Jewish things growing up?

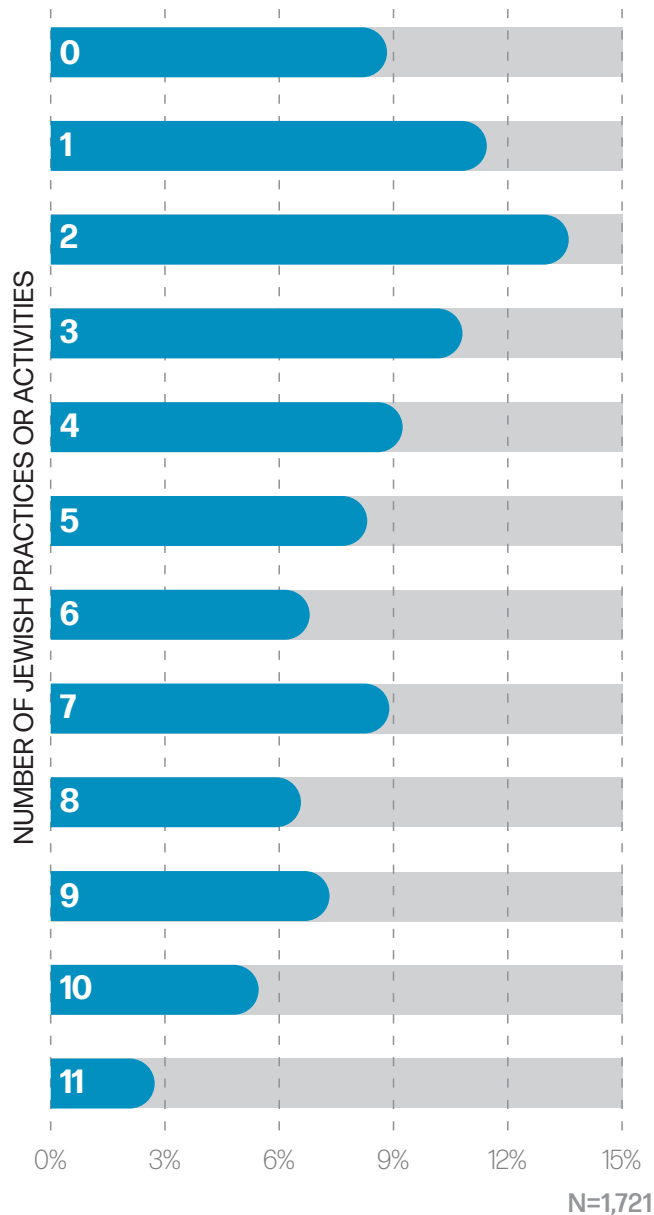


The first question asks students for a general summary of how much they did “Jewish things” growing up. Forty-seven percent of respondents said they did Jewish things growing up often or all the time. A similar percentage (46%) say they did Jewish things rarely or occasionally. And 7% said they never did Jewish things.

The next question asks more specifically about how respondents practiced Judaism growing up. I asked respondents whether or not they had the following experiences: attending synagogue services, celebrating Shabbat and/or Jewish holidays, having a bar/bat mitzvah, attending Hebrew school, visiting Israel, participating in a Jewish youth group, attending a Jewish overnight camp, attending a Jewish day school, cooking Jewish foods, and wearing clothing/jewelry with Jewish symbols.¹⁶

BACKGROUND 2

Which of the following did you do growing up? (Count)



“My Jewish identity is extremely cherry picked. Both of my parents are Israeli...So I’m very culturally Jewish and almost no religion. So, we celebrate Hannukah and Rosh Hashanah and nothing else. I’ve never been in a synagogue. I didn’t have a bat mitzvah. I’ve never even seen a Torah. But I have always connected my Judaism to being Israeli. And to my language and my family in Israel.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

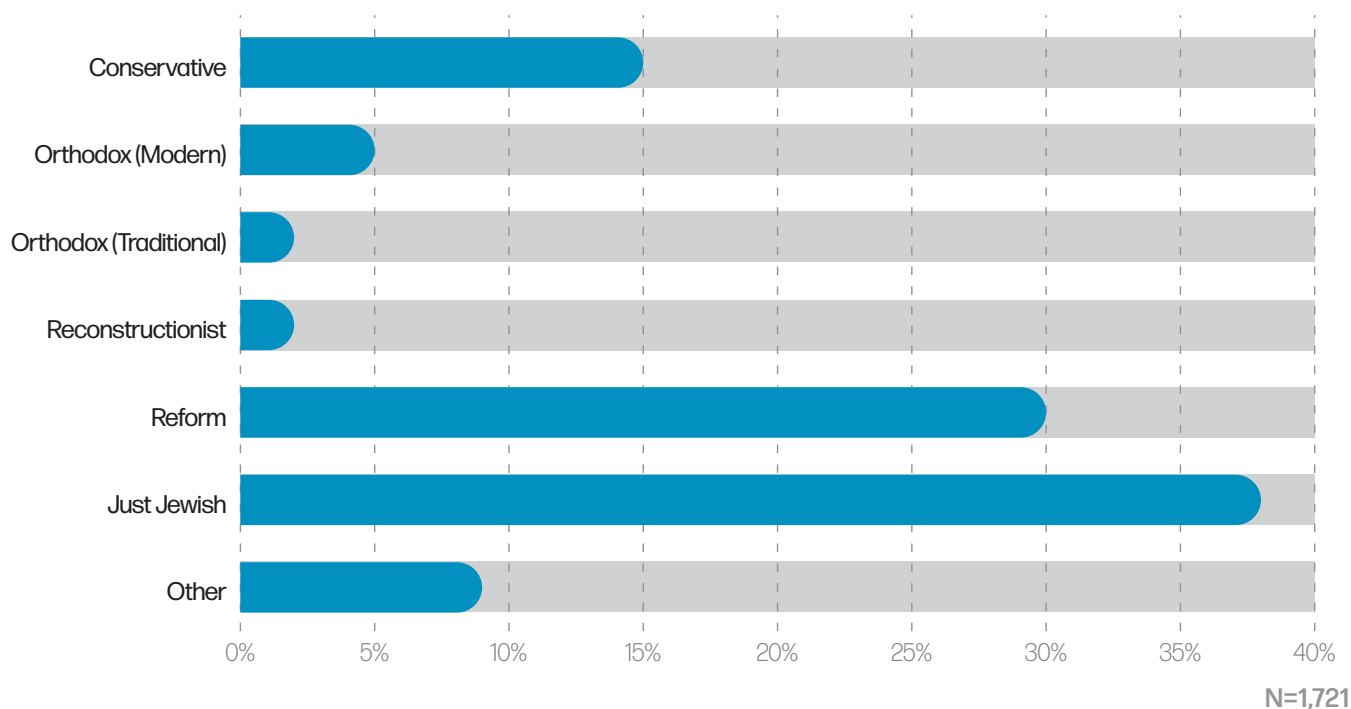
“Where I grew up, there were really no other Jewish kids around and I’ve never been to a Bar Mitzvah or anything.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

The median Jewish respondent did 4 of these things. About 40% reported they did at least five of these practices or activities when they were growing up. The most common practices are celebrating shabbat and/or holidays (67%), cooking Jewish foods (64%), and attending synagogue services (55%). The least common practices are attending a Jewish day school (15%), attending overnight camp (26%), and visiting Israel (27%).

BACKGROUND 3

Which of the following best describes how your family practiced Judaism growing up?



Next, I asked about whether the respondent's family affiliated with a Jewish denomination. About half identified with a denomination, most commonly Reform, followed by Conservative, and then Orthodox and finally Reconstructionist. The largest share of students identifies as "just Jewish", not having been raised in a denomination.

"I consider myself half-Jewish. My dad is Jewish, but they kind of just celebrated the holidays. My parents raised me without a religious background, so it hasn't played a huge role in my life. It's definitely interesting thinking about not being fully Jewish or religious, but celebrating Hanukkah and Passover. It's not a huge part of my life, but definitely something that I identify with, at least ethnically and semi-culturally as well."

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

BACKGROUND 4

Are any of the people who raised you Jewish?

The fourth measure of Jewish background is whether the respondents were raised by zero, one, or two Jewish parents/guardians.¹⁷ Forty-five percent of the sample was raised by two Jewish parents/guardians, 41% by one Jewish parent/guardian, and 14% were raised in other circumstances. The "other" category includes a variety of experiences, such as students who converted to Judaism after being raised in other faith traditions and those who have a stepparent who is Jewish but who was not a primary guardian. Other life experiences are captured by open-ended responses, such as: "My parents actively hid the fact that we are Jewish from me" and "My mother was born Jewish, but her beliefs now are a little unclear." Note, the rate of 45% of students raised by two Jewish parents is quite close to the 2020 Pew study, which found 49% of 18-29 year olds were raised by two Jewish parents.

"My mom is Catholic and my dad is Jewish. I do in a way still feel connected to Christianity because that's what my mom is. But growing up my best friends have always been Jewish, so I feel connected to that side as well."

SUNY BINGHAMTON FEMALE
FEMALE

BACKGROUND 5

Growing up, did you practice customs from other religions, in addition to, or instead of, Judaism?

A final measure of Jewish background is whether the students grew up practicing customs from religions other than Judaism. About half (48%) said yes that they practiced other religions. The overwhelming majority of individuals who say they practiced another religion growing up (86%) identify Christianity as that other religion. The others report practicing Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or other religious customs. Interestingly, a sizeable minority (13%) of students raised by two Jewish parents reported that they practiced customs from other religions. These appear to be situations when Jewish families adopt customs such as Christmas and Easter decorations.

These five background measures are all highly correlated with one another. Using the five measures, I create a scale, called *Background*, which essentially scores every respondent on the degree to which they have a traditional Jewish background.¹⁸ Consider some examples. A respondent who said they did Jewish things all the time growing up, and said they did 8 out of the 11 practices (e.g., visited Israel, attended Jewish summer camp), affiliated with a Jewish denomination, was raised by two Jewish parents, and did not practice any other religion would be in the 95th percentile of the scale. A respondent who never did any Jewish things, reported 2 out of the 11 practices/activities, was not affiliated with a denomination, was raised by one Jewish parent, and practiced another religion in addition to Judaism would be in the 10th percentile.

Why use a scale such as this instead of just observing each individual measure of Jewish background? The idea behind scaling is that each of these underlying survey items offers a different, and incomplete, view into one overarching phenomenon. In this case, the overarching phenomenon is the Jewish nature of the student's upbringing. Each of these views is imperfect and measured with some error. By combining multiple views into a single measure, the scale offers a clearer picture of the phenomenon than any survey question can provide on its own. Again, this does not mean that the scale perfectly encapsulates the phenomenon of interest, but only that it provides a fuller picture than any one measure.

B. AFFECT TOWARD JEWISHNESS AND JEWISH IDENTITY

While the background questions summarize the respondents' upbringing, a separate set of questions gauge attitudes, or affect, toward their Jewish identity. Specifically, I use four questions to create a second scale, called *Affect*.

AFFECT 1

Count of Jewish identities

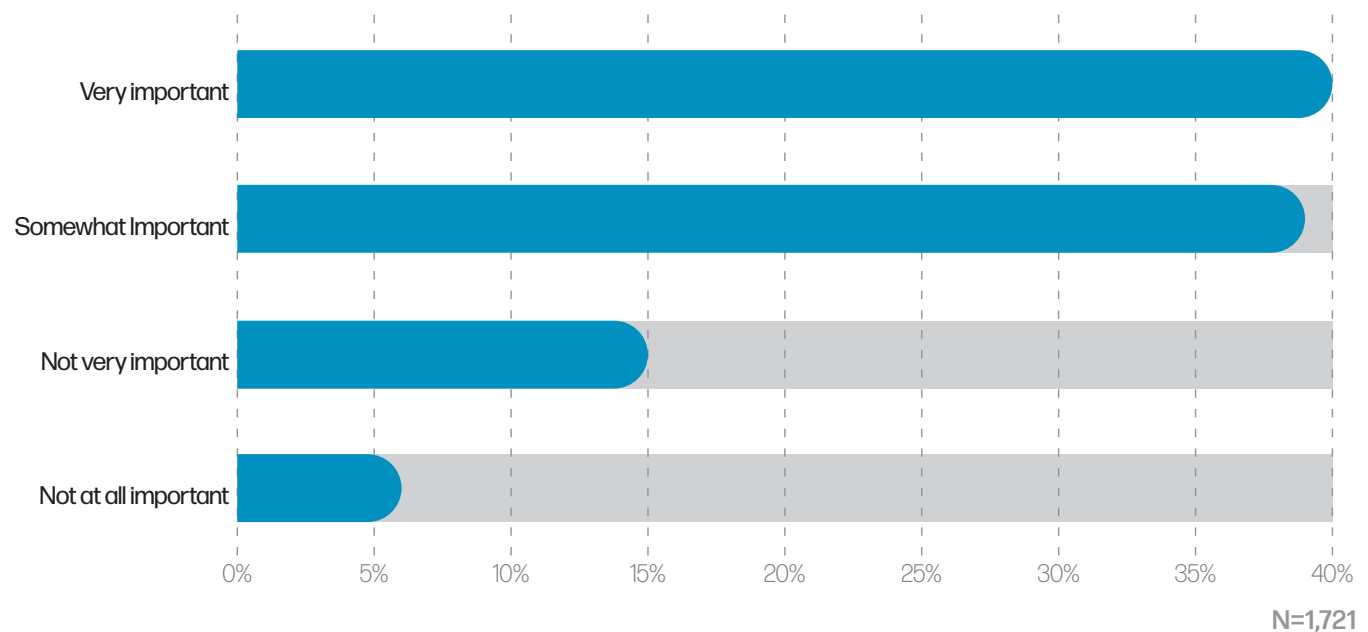
Recall that respondents were asked if they identified as Jewish in any of the following ways: ethnically, culturally, spiritually, and religiously. The first measure of *Affect* simply counts how many of these four categories applied to each respondent. About half (46%) of the Jewish sample selected just one category. Another 18% selected two identities, 14% selected three identities, and 22% selected four identities.

The majority of Jewish students (more than three quarters) identify as ethnically Jewish, far more than select any other form of identity. But most students affirm one or more of the other ways of being Jewish as well. The count of identities is, arguably, more reflective of a student's disposition toward Jewishness (affect) rather than just their background. After all, some students were raised by parents who were religiously Jewish, but the students consider themselves not religious. Other students were raised by agnostic parents, but they see themselves as spiritually or religiously or culturally Jewish.

The second measure asks the respondents how important their Jewish identity is to them, on a four-point scale. Three-quarters of the sample said their Jewish identity is either somewhat or very important to them.

AFFECT 2

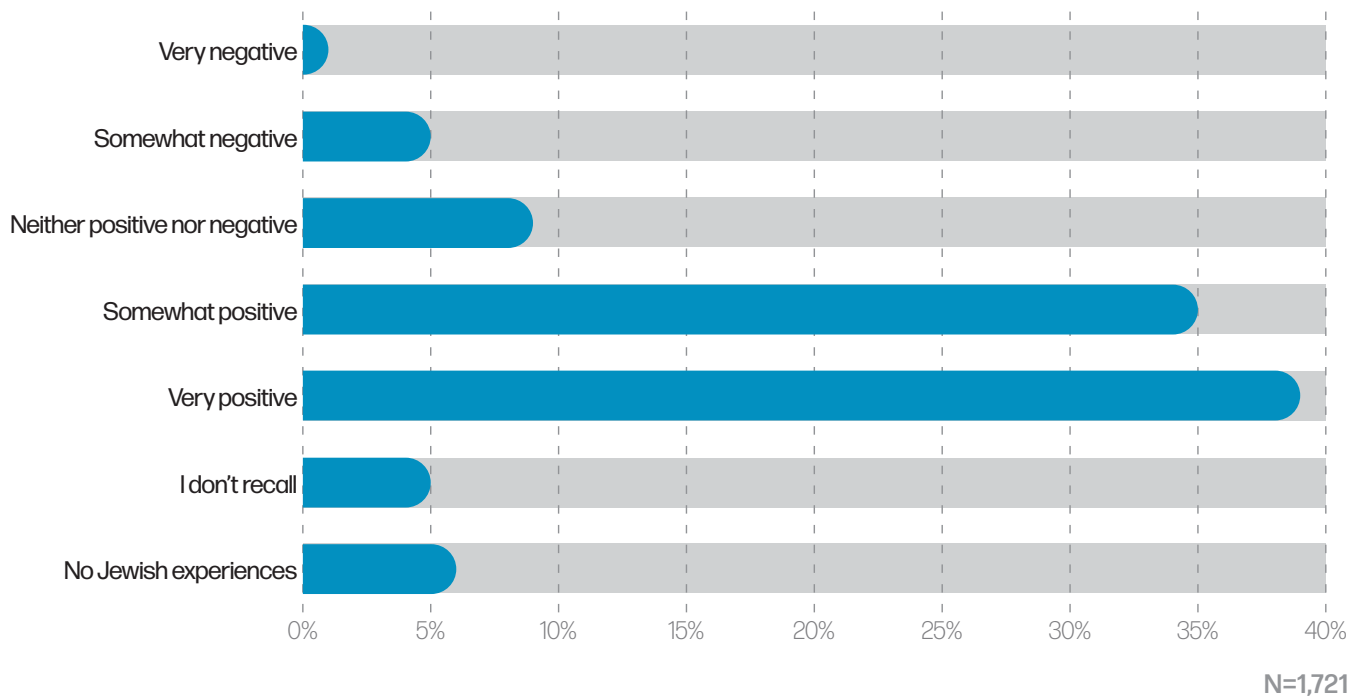
How important to you is your Jewish identity?



AFFECT 3

Growing up, what was your overall feeling about the Jewish activities and events you participated in?

The third measure asks about how the students felt about their Jewish activities and experiences growing up. Do they recall these memories positively or negatively? While 11% of the sample doesn't recall or never had any Jewish experiences, the respondents who did have Jewish experiences recall them quite fondly.



“If someone asks me if I’m Jewish, I’d say yes. But if there were three things that someone needed to know about me, none of them would be that I’m Jewish, because I don’t consider that a defining characteristic.”

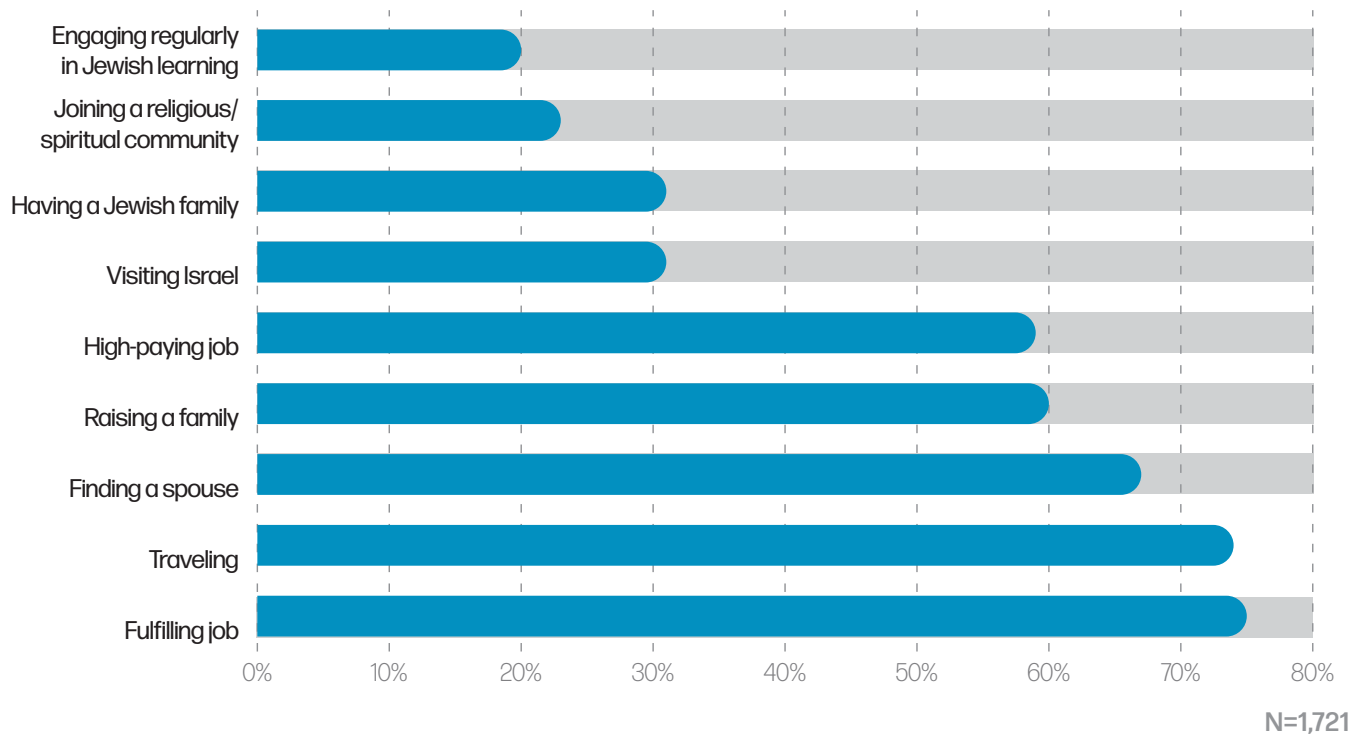
OHIO STATE
MALE

“I grew up very much involved in Temple and in Jewish school, but I just did not have great experiences. So, I’m not at a place where I’m ready to reintegrate into that aspect of my identity and I tend to value other aspects of my identity more.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

AFFECT 4

Thinking about your future after college, are any of the following important to you?



“I feel like I am pretty involved. And I like the level that I am. Like, I grew up doing Shabbat and I still do when I’m home, Shabbat every Friday night. And so, I like being able to do that at college and go to Shabbat.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
FEMALE

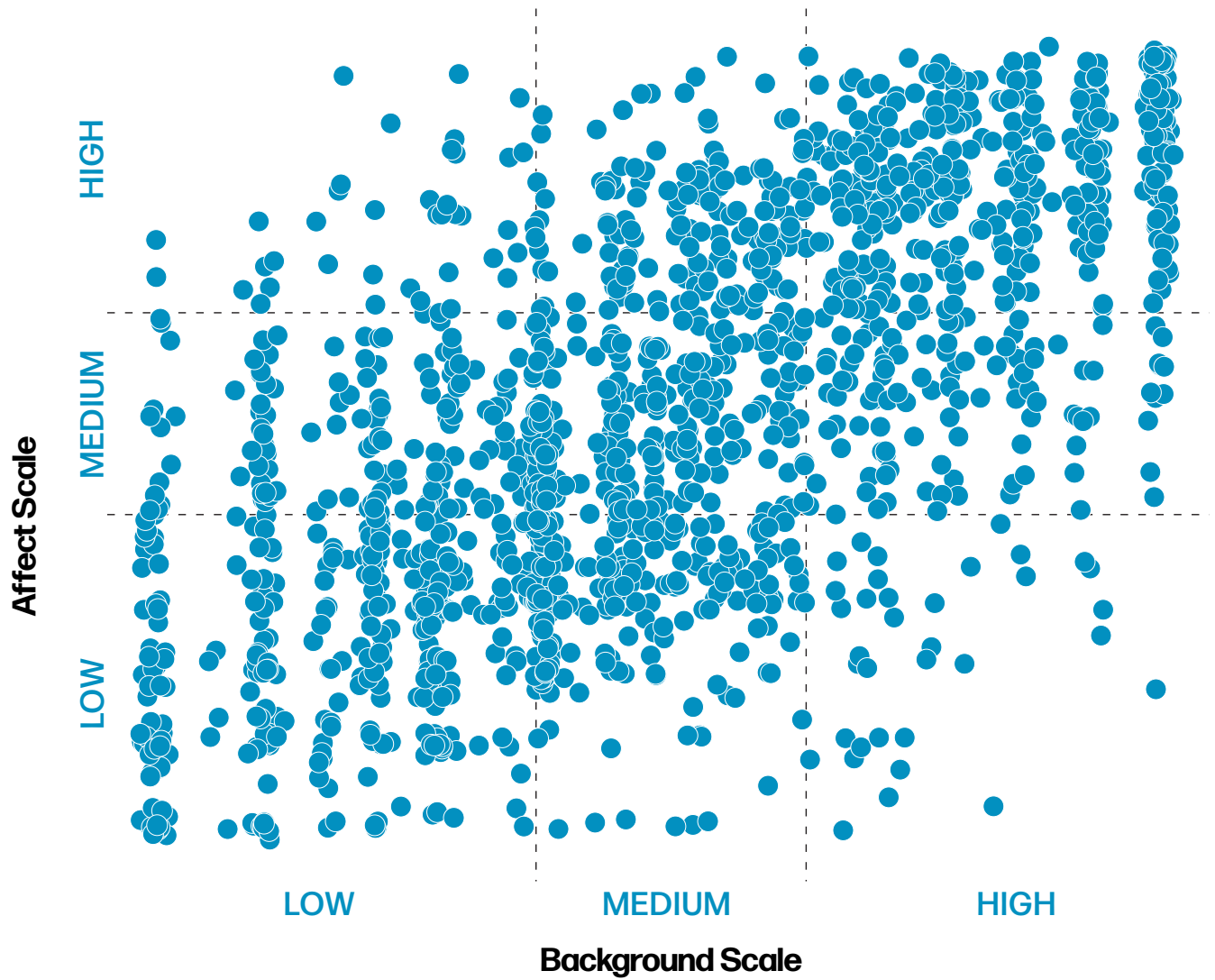
Finally, I gauge the students’ desire to be connected to Jewish life after college. I use this measure in recognition of the fact that for some people, their college years are not a period in which religion or religious culture is a priority, yet they believe that in the future they will care more about religious engagement.¹⁹ In a survey question, I asked about a variety of activities or goals the students might consider important in their future. Most of the options were unrelated to Jewishness (e.g., traveling and seeing the world, having a high-paying job), but four of the items asked about the importance of having a Jewish family,

being a member of a religious community, learning, and visiting Israel. The students could click as many of the options as they felt were important to them. Most respondents did not check that the Jewish items were important to their future.

Past behavior is a strong predictor of future interest on these measures. For instance, respondents who visited Israel growing up are twice as likely (48% vs. 25%) to believe visiting Israel is important after college compared to respondents who did not visit Israel growing up. Respondents who attended synagogue are three times more likely (33% versus 11%) to say it’s important that they are part of a religious/spiritual community compared to respondents who did not attend synagogue.

As with the measures of *Background*, the measures of *Affect* are highly correlated with one another. I create a scale to combine the four measures.²⁰ To give concrete examples, a respondent who identifies as Jewish in all four ways (culturally, religiously, spiritually, and ethnically), reports her Jewish identity is very important to her, feels positively toward Jewish activities she did growing up, and feels that all the future activities (e.g., having a Jewish family) are important would be in the 99th percentile. And a respondent who only identifies as Jewish in one way, does not feel Jewish identity is at all important, had a negative experience growing up, and doesn’t believe future practices are important would be in the 1st percentile.

C. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFECT AND BACKGROUND



A scatterplot shows the relationship between *Background* and *Affect* graphically for the students in the sample. As indicated in the graph, for each of the scales, I divide the sample into three groupings, which are labeled low, medium, and high. Throughout the remainder of the report, I will sometimes refer to students who have low, medium, or high scores on these scales. In referring to placement on the numeric scales, I intend to impose no moral judgement on students' backgrounds, attitudes, or behaviors.

As is apparent from the graph, *Background* and *Affect* are highly correlated. Why? It is possible for each to influence the other. For instance, a child who has a strong disposition toward learning about Judaism (affect) may encourage his or her parents to engage in Jewish practices (background). However, it is much more likely that student's upbringing (their involvement with Jewish activities, their practice of Jewish versus non-Jewish customs) was mostly chosen for them by their parents. In that sense, *Background* seems more likely to exert influence over *Affect* than the other way around.

BACKGROUND	AFFECT		
	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Low	19%	14	2
Medium	9	15	7
High	2	9	24

For a different view of the relationship between *Background* and *Affect*, a table collapses the scatterplot and puts each student into one of nine cells. Most students who have high *Background* scores also have high *Affect* scores (i.e. $24/(24+9+2) = 69\%$). However, it is also clear that students appear in all cells of this table. There are students who come from backgrounds where, for instance, they did not engage in many Jewish activities but the students' Jewish identity is very important to them. There are also those who come from more Jewishly-engaged backgrounds who have low affect toward their identity.

D. CLASS, RACE, AND MEASURES OF BACKGROUND AND AFFECT

Before assessing the student's college experience, it is worth reflecting on some important demographic correlates of these identity scales. Respondents from upper and upper-middle class economic backgrounds (I'll refer to these as higher-income students) differ significantly from other respondents on measures of Jewish upbringing. While 57% of higher-income students said they did Jewish things growing up often or all the time, only 38% of lower-income students said the same. Higher-income students are more likely to come from families that are affiliated with a denomination (69%) compared to lower-income families (55%). Higher-income students are more likely to have two Jewish parents (56%) compared to lower-income students (33%), and they are more likely to only celebrate Jewish customs in their homes (64%) compared to lower-income students (40%). Altogether, 71% of the students with high scores on the *Background* scale come from upper or upper-middle class families, and 63% of the students with low scores on the *Background* scale come from lower and middle class families.

It is beyond the scope of the present study to fully unpack *why* there is such a strong relationship between income and *Background*. Of course, many Jewish activities are financially costly. Cost can be a barrier to lower-income families for a range of activities, such as synagogue participation and Jewish educational experiences for children. On the other hand, some families for whom Jewish activities are a high priority might choose professions or earn supplementary income to pay for these activities. In this sense, the causal relationship between income and interest in participation can go in both directions. The relationship is also multi-generational and thus it is very difficult to parse.

Just as there is a relationship between economic class and background measures, there is also an observed relationship between racial identity and the background measures. Consider a brief comparison between White Jewish students as well as five groups of Jews of Color for which the sample size is 25 students or more. Those categories are Asian (N=66), Black/African-American (N=29), Hispanic/Latino (N=86), Middle Eastern (N=70), and respondents who identify as “two or more races”, which I will describe as multiracial (N=132).²¹ Note that these sample sizes, especially the African-American sample size, are small, and so one should be cautious in reading too much into the results. While it is possible to combine Jews of Color and yield a greater sample size, doing so would conceal some important differences that emerge between racial groups.

White and Middle Eastern students report having done Jewish things growing up often or all the time at higher rates (52% and 51%, respectively) than Asian students (25%), Black students (21%), Hispanic/Latino students (38%) or multiracial students (32%). White and Middle Eastern students are 10-20 percentage points more likely than Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial students to be affiliated with denominations. While 60% of Middle Eastern students were raised by two Jewish parents, that number is 50% for White students, 32% for Hispanic/Latino students, 31% for Black students, 27% for Asian students, and 20% for multiracial students. Similarly, most White and Middle Eastern students celebrated only Jewish customs in their homes, while most Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial students celebrated non-Jewish as well as Jewish customs in their homes. Of respondents who have high scores on the *Background* scale, 90% are either White or Middle Eastern. Of those who have low scores on the *Background* scale, 66% are either White or Middle Eastern.

As with the discussion of economic class, it is beyond the scope of this study to unpack all the reasons why Jewish students identifying with different racial groups have different Jewish background experiences. The

relationship between racial identity and background is multigenerational and difficult to fully parse via a single snapshot survey of students. Of course, part of the reason for racial differences is that, as noted, most students who are not White or Middle Eastern come from families with one or zero Jewish parents. Students of all racial identities with one or zero Jewish parents participated in fewer Jewish activities growing up than students with two Jewish parents.

But there are likely other reasons for the observed relationship between racial identity and participation. Past research has suggested that Jews of Color experience racial discrimination in settings such as synagogues.²² This experience may lead families to alternative expressions of Jewish practice than are captured in the measures here. Furthermore, there is a strong relationship between economic class and racial identity in the sample, with more White students (59% of them) coming from higher-income families than Middle Eastern students (46% of them), Black students (43% of them), Asian students (33% high income), Hispanic/Latino students (29% high income) and multiracial students (33% high income). To the extent that economic class presents a barrier to Jewish activities, it disproportionately impacts Jews of Color.

What about the relationship between class, race, and measures of *Affect*? Given the strong relationship between *Background* and *Affect*, it is not surprising that *Affect* also varies by racial group and by economic class. Students from higher-income families are twice as likely as lower-income students to identify with all four forms of Jewish identity (ethnic, cultural, religious, spiritual). They are ten percentage points more likely to say their Jewish identity is very important to them (45%) compared to lower-income students (35%). They are 11 percentage points more likely to report positive experiences in Jewish activities growing up (79%) compared to lower-income students (68%). And they are 10 percentage points more likely to want to do at least one Jewish practice after college (54%) compared to lower income students (44%).

Middle Eastern Jewish students are most likely to say their Jewish identity is very important to them (54%), followed by White students (42%), Hispanic/Latino students (35%), Black students (34%), multiracial students (33%), and Asian students (17%). On all the other items measuring affect, White and Middle Eastern students differ from Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial students in similar ways as on self-reported importance of Jewish identity.

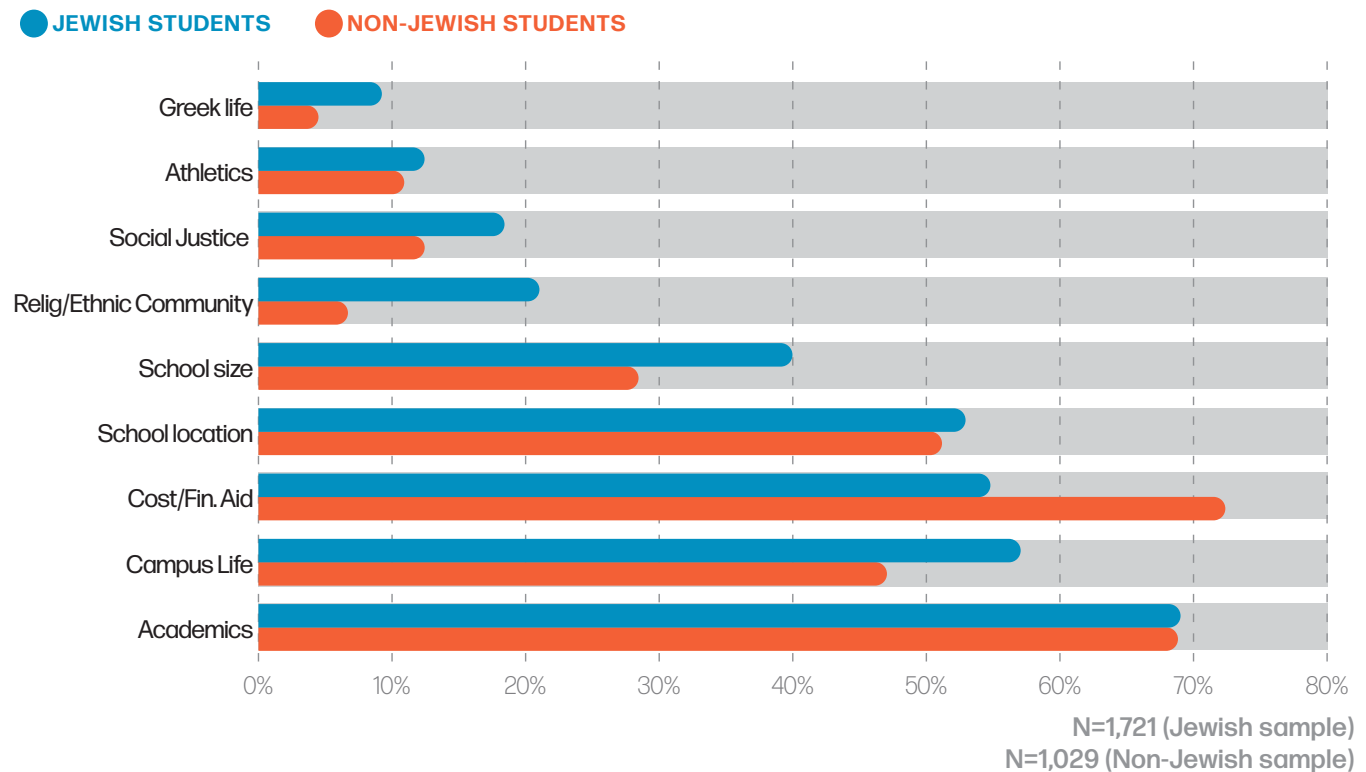
Where They Go to College

After the Screener, the first question the respondents saw asked them, **Which of the following was most important to you when you were deciding where to apply to college? Select all that apply.**

Students could click up to up to nine pre-set options, as well as write their own reasons. The figure compares the items that the Jewish sample chose versus the non-Jewish sample. The most common answer for the Jewish students was the school’s academic reputation. The non-Jewish sample valued this equally to the Jewish sample. However, for the non-Jewish students, the highest priority was cost/financial aid. The Jewish students were significantly less likely to say that cost/financial aid was an important factor in choosing where to apply to college. They were more likely to check most of the other categories.

Compared to just 7% of the non-Jewish students who said that their “religious/ethnic/racial group’s community on campus” was an important factor, 21% of the Jewish sample selected this item. Of those with high scores on the *Background* and *Affect* scales, 35% and 41%, respectively, said the campus community was important to their decision of where to apply.

Which of the following was most important to you when you were deciding where to apply to college? Select all that apply



While far more Jewish students say that their religious/ethnic/racial group's community on campus is important to them compared to non-Jewish students, even among Jewish students with high *Background* and *Affect* scores, most students do not consider the Jewish community on campus to be an important factor.

Controlling for *Background* and *Affect*, a regression model shows significant differences by gender (female students more likely to identify the religious/ethnic/racial community as an important factor compared to male students), and by political identity (Republicans more likely than Democrats). The partisan finding here (as well as similar findings described below) is explained in part by the correlation between Orthodox Jewish identity and partisanship and in part by psychology research suggesting a stronger disposition among political conservatives to value their ingroup.

Where are the Jewish students actually enrolled? The Jewish students are 60/40 enrolled in public vs. private colleges and universities. The ten schools with the largest number of Jewish respondents in this study (more than 30 respondents each) are Arizona State, SUNY Binghamton, Ithaca College, Ohio State, Tufts, Tulane, UC Santa Cruz, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, and University of Vermont. Another 12 universities have between 20-29 students in the sample: Colorado University Boulder, California Polytechnic State University, Macalester, NYU, Pitt, Rutgers, UConn, UMass Amherst, UNC, UT Austin, University of Central Florida, and Wash U.

The non-Jewish sample has significant overlap with these schools, with more than 30 respondents from Arizona State, California Polytechnic, Ohio State, Pitt, Tufts, UMass Amherst, Michigan, UNC, and UT Austin. The non-Jewish sample also has more than 30 respondents in schools ranging from Oklahoma State and UT Dallas to Stony Brook and University of Pennsylvania.

The concentration of respondents in particular schools is partly a function of where College Pulse was able to complete interviews. The concentration of respondents

should not be taken as an estimate of where Jewish students are clustered in the population. In regression analyses below, I use standard statistical methods (i.e., fixed effects) to ensure that the results are not driven by attitudes that are concentrated within any one school community.

Life on Campus

For most Jewish students, Jewish life on campus is not part of their college experience. They are interested in other aspects of life, from classes to sports to work to socializing. How do the students think about their overall priorities? How do they allocate their time?

“I might want to get more involved in something like Hillel, just mostly for the social aspect of it, because I’m not involved in too many student groups. But it’s not something that has ever, you know, had some unusual amount of appeal to me.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

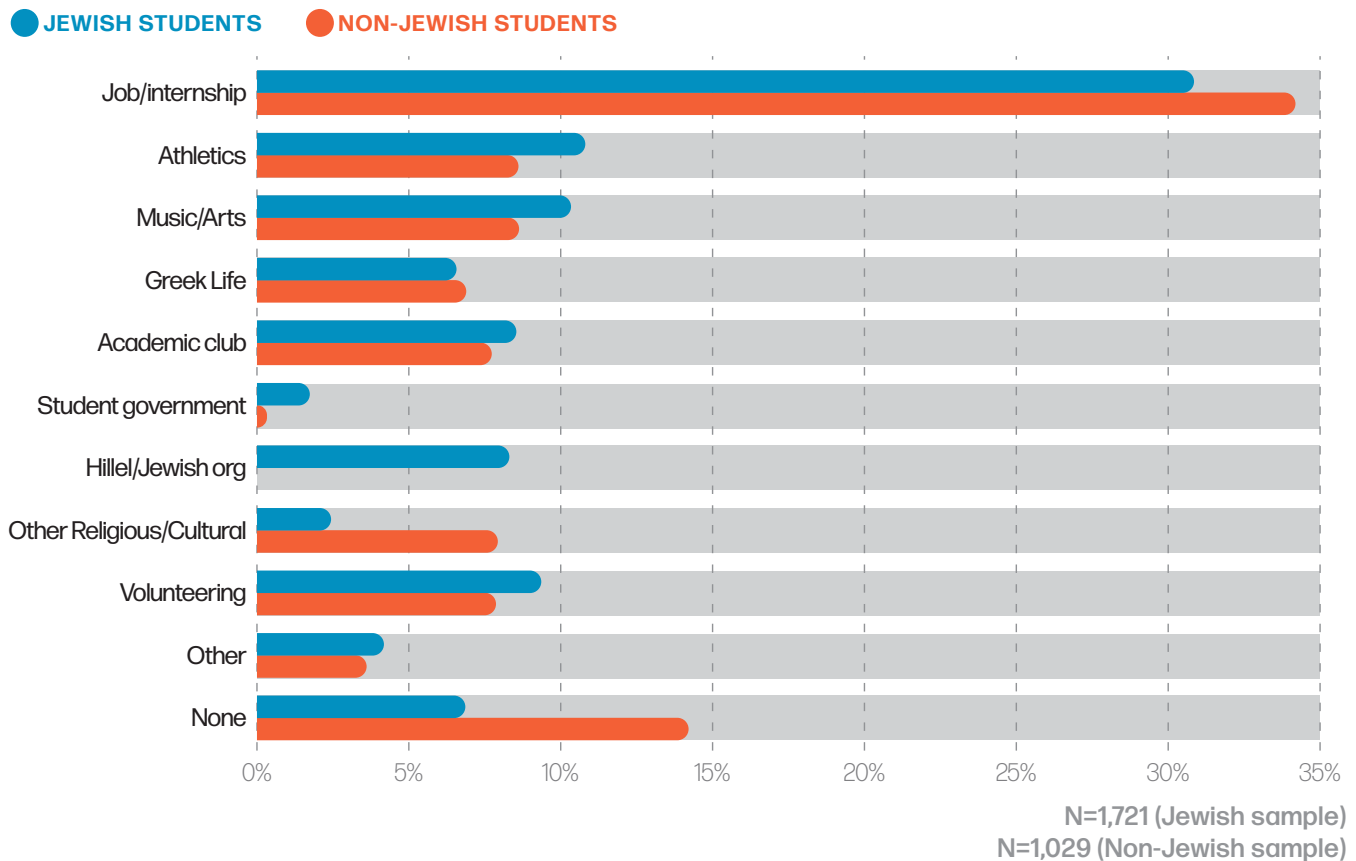
The survey asked students, “**What is your most personally rewarding extracurricular activity in college?**” Students could click only one from the list that was provided.

Compared to non-Jewish students, the Jewish students were more likely to identify an extracurricular activity they found rewarding. By far, the most common answer was a job or internship (31%) followed by athletics (11%) and music or arts (10%). About 8% of the Jewish students identified Hillel or another Jewish student

organization as their most rewarding extracurricular activity.

For students who have high scores on the *Background* or *Affect* scales, a larger share (14% and 18% respectively) selected Hillel or another Jewish organization. For these students, a Jewish organization was second only to job/internship as the most commonly selected extracurricular activity. For students with low scores on the *Background* or *Affect* scales, a lower share (3% and 2% respectively) selected Hillel or another Jewish organization.

What is your most personally rewarding extracurricular activity in college?



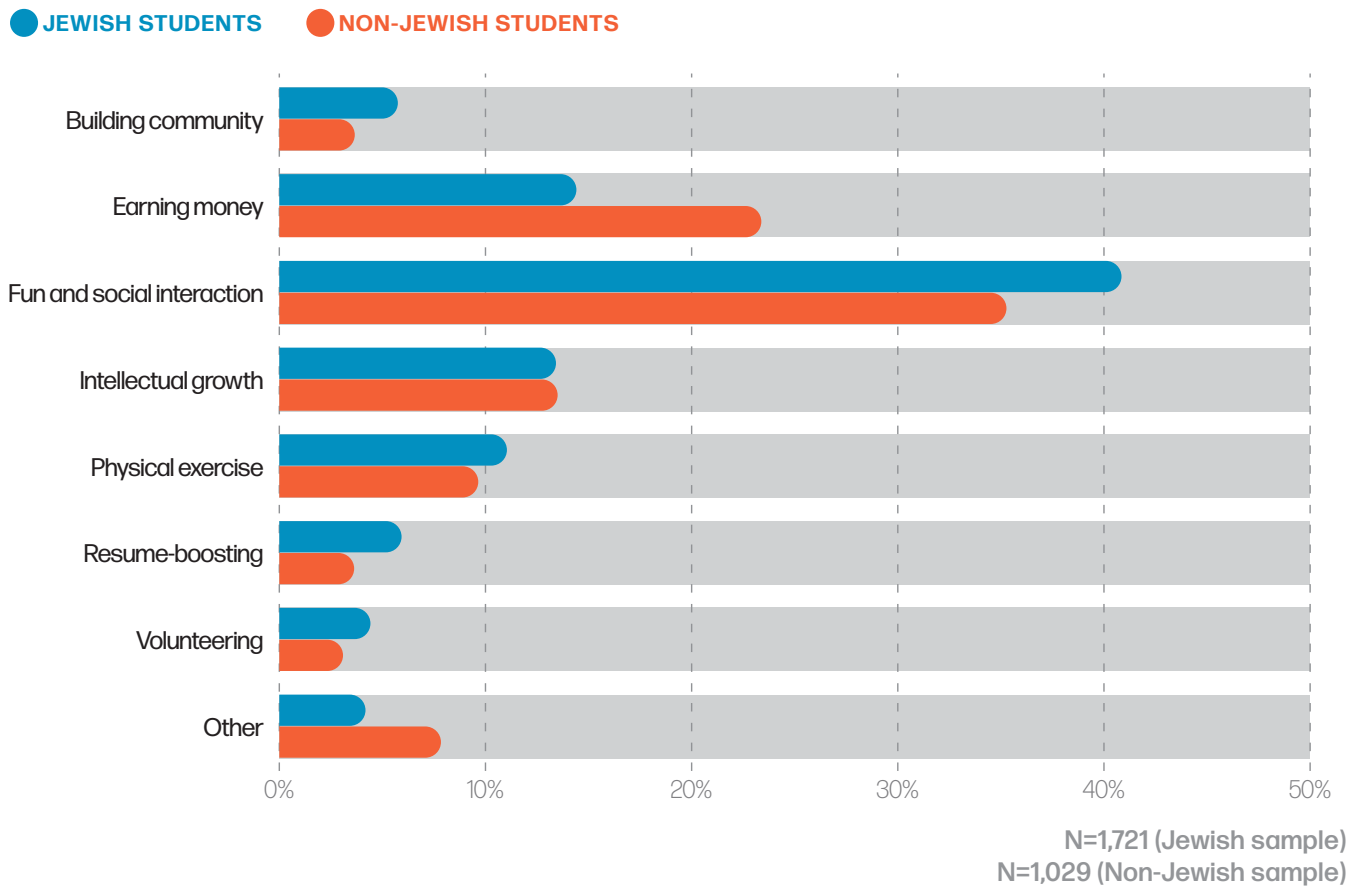
I next asked respondents, “**What is your time outside of classes mostly focused on?**” This question is not asking about specific extracurricular clubs but generally how the students are spending their time. They could select just one from the set of options.

The Jewish students are quite different in how they spend their time. Notably, the Jewish students are substantially less likely to focus on earning money outside of class time. Instead, they mostly spend their time outside the classroom socializing. Even though fewer Jewish students need to earn money in their

free time, they are not significantly more likely than non-Jewish students to prioritize volunteering or intellectual growth. They are only slightly more likely to prioritize “building community.” The only two items on which there is a statistically significant difference between Jewish and non-Jewish students are “earning money” and “fun and social interaction”.

A regression analysis shows that the students’ family income stands out as a predictor for spending less time working and more time socializing. Because students with high scores on *Background* and *Affect* tend to come

What is your time outside of classes mostly focused on?



from higher-income families, they, more than other students, are spending less time working and more time socializing. To the extent that economic comfort allows students to choose activities in college apart from schoolwork and earning money, the students are mostly choosing fun and social life over civic engagement. The students from higher-income families are not spending more time volunteering or building community than students from lower-income families.

A third window into the lives of students is a question not about how they spend their time or their extracurricular activities, but what they would do if they had *more* time. The survey asks, “**If you had an additional three hours a week, how would you want to use the time?**”

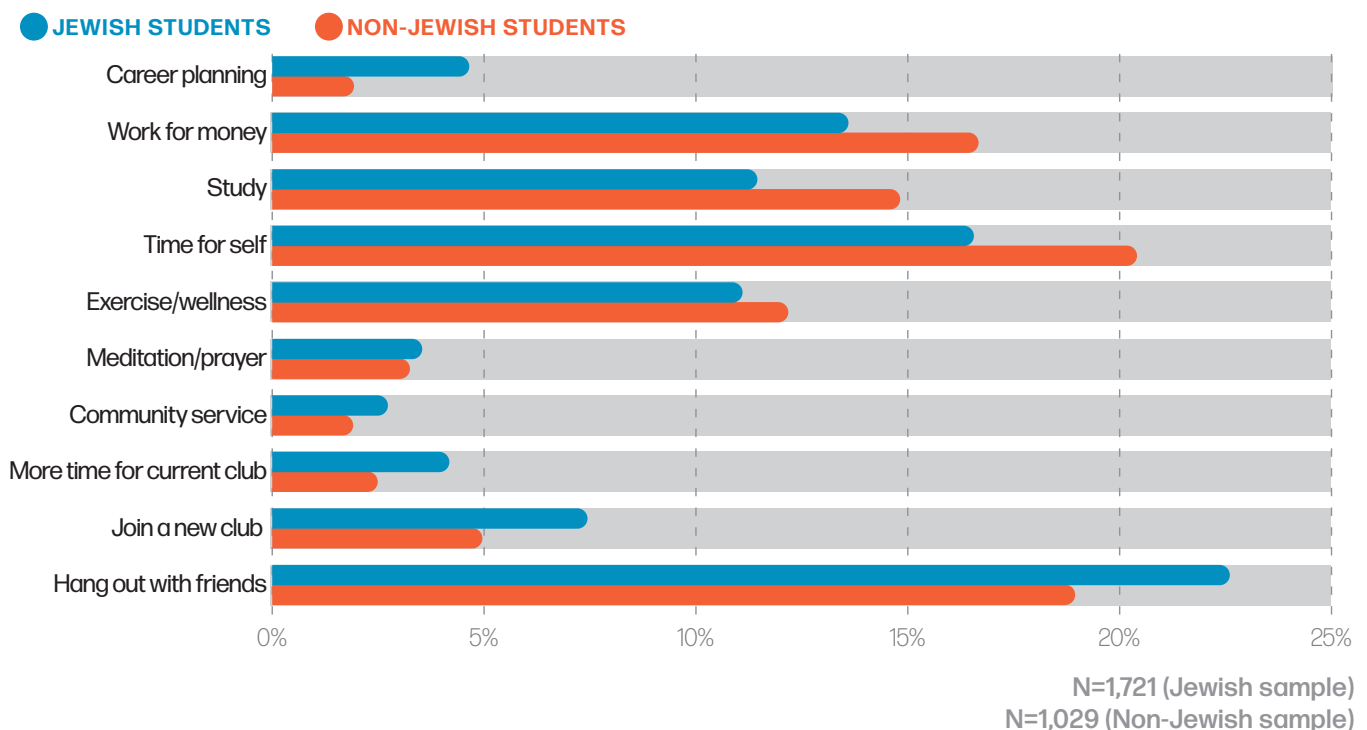
Altogether, about 30% of the Jewish students prioritize school, work, or careers, and about 30% prioritize time for themselves, or working out, or spiritual growth. A little less than a quarter prioritize informal socializing. And about 15% of the students prioritize volunteering or community activity.

Finally, I asked the students an open-ended question, “**We’re interested in exploring what it means to live a satisfying life. What aspects of your life do you currently find meaningful, fulfilling or satisfying?**”

This question is a slightly modified version of a question that Pew asked to a random sample of adults.²³ In Pew’s study of the general public, the most common answer was family. Some 7 in 10 Americans mentioned family, twice the rate of the next most common answer (career). Material wealth (money) was a popular response to Pew (23%), and about a fifth of people gave answers focused on religion/spirituality, friends, or hobbies.

What about the Jewish college students? Most of the answers fell into one or more of ten categories. Whereas family was, by a wide margin, the #1 priority of all adults, it ranks number five among college students, after social life (57% of responses), work (49%), generic values such as joy or freedom (36%), and hobbies (23%). At 22%, family ranks above volunteering (9%), material well-being (8%), religion (6%), health (3%), and pets (1%). The responses from the Jewish and non-Jewish college students were very similar to one another.

If you had an additional three hours a week, how would you want to use that time?



Interest In and Closeness To Jewish Life On Campus

When they attend college, students leave the home and the community that their family created for them and begin to find their own paths as adults. Where does the Jewish community on campus fit into that path?

I asked students, “How close do you feel to a Jewish community right now?”

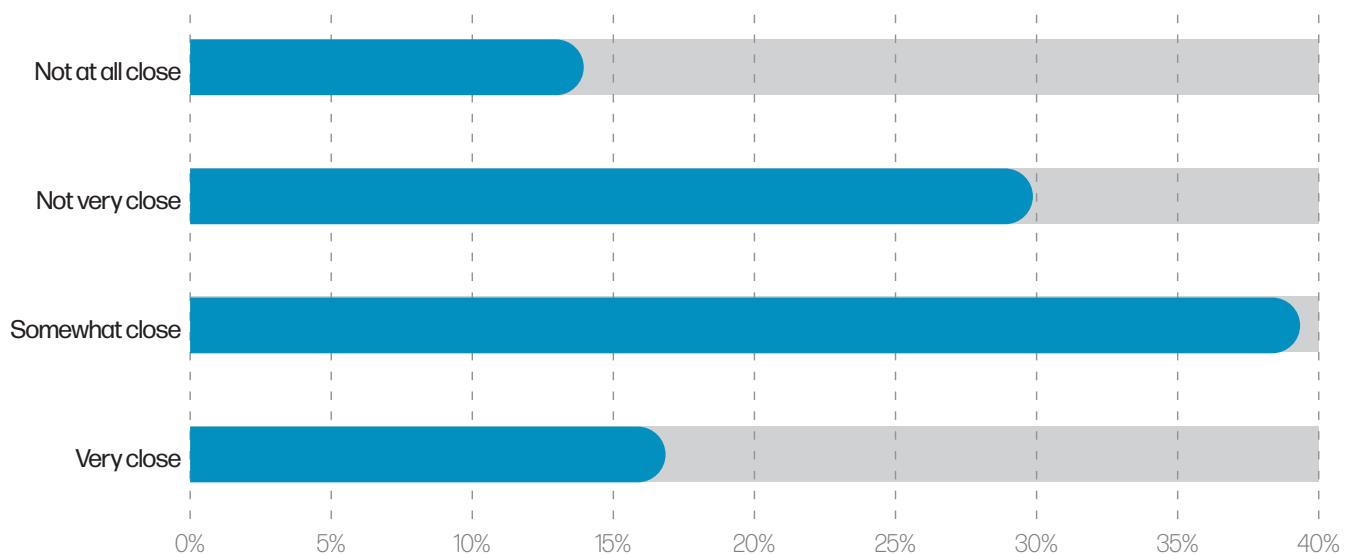
Over half of the Jewish sample said somewhat or very close. Not surprisingly, the responses were highly predicted by *Background* and *Affect*. Among those with low scores on *Background*, about 30% feel somewhat or very close. Among those with high scores, it’s closer to 75%.

“I do feel a pretty good connection with the community, but I would like it to be stronger. One of the biggest things right now is just time. It’s finals season.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

Consider just the relationship between this question (feeling close to a Jewish community) and the question discussed earlier of the importance of one’s Jewish identity. For students who said their Jewish identity is not at all important, 19% said they feel somewhat or very close to a Jewish community. For students who said their Jewish

How close do you feel to a Jewish community right now?



N=1,721 (Jewish sample)

identity is very important to them, 92% said they feel somewhat or very close to a Jewish community.

Now recall an earlier question that asked respondents about the kinds of activities that are important to them *after* college. One of the options was “being a member of a spiritual or religious community.” Of respondents who feel very close to a Jewish community now, 46% said this that being a member of a community after college is important. For those who feel not at all close, 9% reported that membership after college is important to them.

How do feelings of closeness vary by class year? Do students feel closer to the Jewish community when they are first-year students? Maybe, they feel a stronger sense of connection to their home communities and/or are welcomed into a Jewish community on campus. Or do students develop a greater sense of community as seniors, after they’ve been fully acclimated into

a campus community? (Caveat: This survey was conducted in 2022, and the seniors, especially, had a highly unusual college experience due to Covid.)

The answer is that first-years (and sophomores) feel moderately closer to a Jewish community than juniors and seniors. Even in a statistical model that controls for *Affect* and *Background* as well as other characteristics (school community, demographics), there is a statistically significant relationship between class year and feelings of closeness. The feelings get cooler in the later years on campus. Again, it is not clear if this trend would hold in a world where Covid didn’t affect the students’ college experience.

By racial group, Middle Eastern students report feeling closest to a Jewish community (64% somewhat/very). White, Hispanic, Black, and Asian students are about ten percentage points less likely to feel close. And multiracial students are least likely to feel close (44% somewhat/very close).

Feelings of closeness to a Jewish community bear a strong relationship to the social network of the students. Two-thirds of the students who feel very close to the Jewish community report that at least half of their close friends are Jewish. For students who feel not at all close, only 4% are in social networks where most of their friends are Jewish.

This strong relationship between friends and feelings of closeness isn’t obvious, especially on campuses with large Jewish populations. In theory, on these campuses that have large Jewish populations, there are students who feel disconnected from the Jewish community but who have lots of Jewish friends. But that’s not the situation: on the twenty-two campuses where the sample has the greatest number of Jewish respondents, the students on those campuses who feel not at all close to a Jewish community have few Jewish friends.

“The biggest factor is just my course work. Sometimes, I have a lot of work, and I’m also working on a personal project that consumes my time, so the biggest factor to attending Jewish events on campus is just the amount of time I have.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

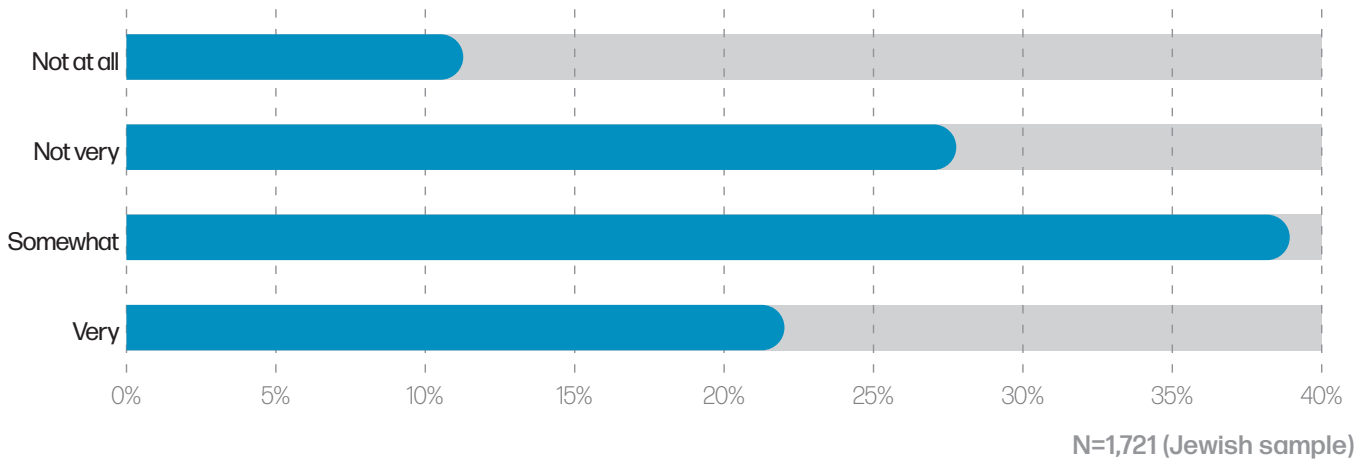
“ I live in a very Jewish community, I go to a school with a large Jewish population, so in that way I feel very connected.”

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
FEMALE

Feelings of closeness aside, how important is it for Jewish students to want to explore the Jewish aspects of their identity while in college?

About 60% of students say it's at least somewhat important, and 20% feel it's very important. Not surprisingly, a strong predictor is *Affect* toward one's Jewish identity. Perhaps more surprisingly, political ideology turns out to be another strong predictor. Students who are Republicans are 8 percentage points more likely than Democrats to say that it's very important to them to explore their Jewish identity. One might attribute partisan differences to the fact that

How important to you personally is exploring Jewish aspects of your identity during college?



“I only have one other Jewish friend and he doesn't go to any of the events. And I'm also at the point where I'm about to head into my third year of college. So, I'm kind of past the big phase of everyone meeting new people. So, it's harder to go to new events.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

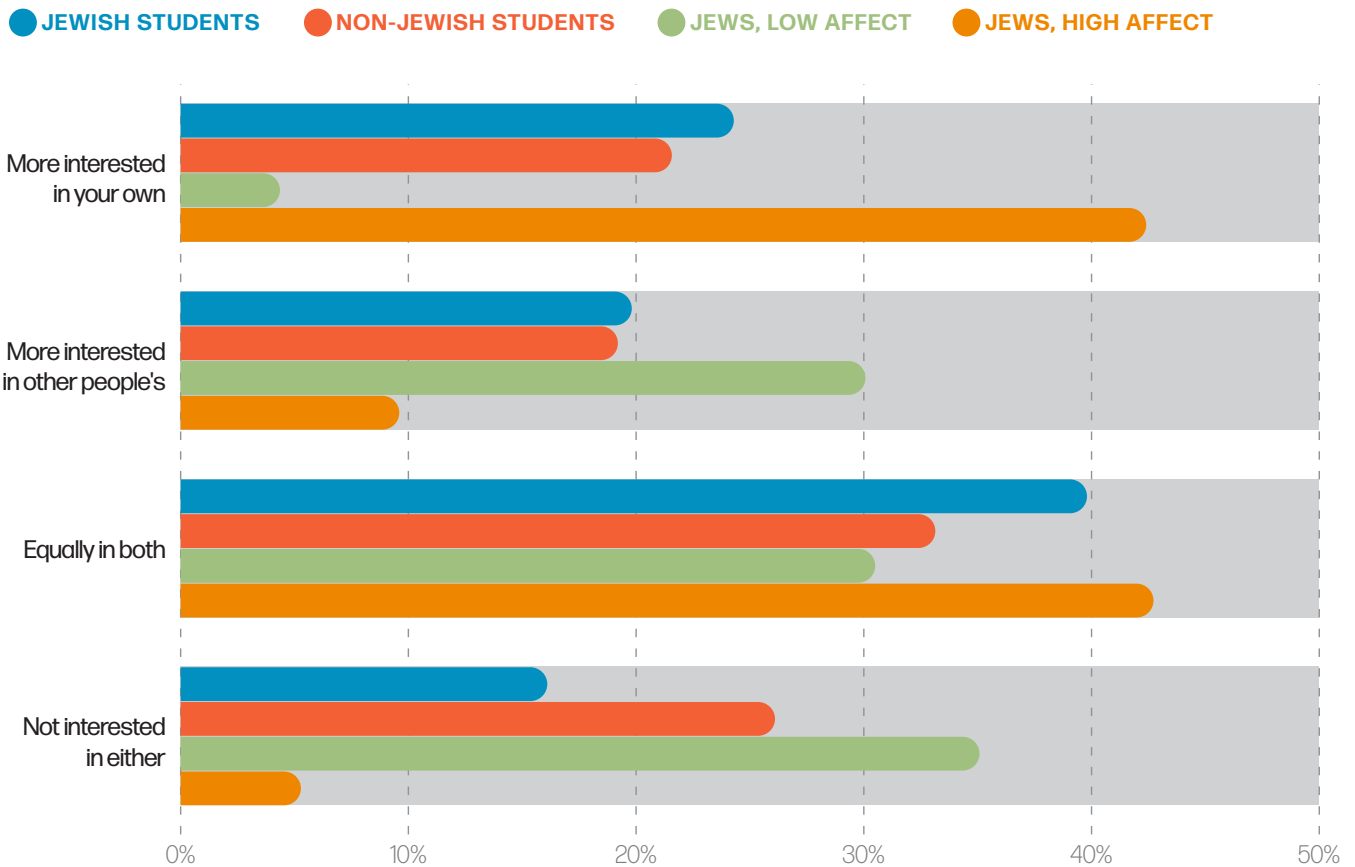
Orthodox Jewish students tend to be Republican, and more religious students might find it more important to explore Jewish aspects of their identity in college.²⁴ However, the partisan difference is significant even among non-Orthodox students.

How important is it for students to explore their Jewish identity relative to exploring other cultures? I asked this directly by inviting students to make the following choice: **During your time in college, would you say you are more interested in exploring your own religion or culture, more interested in exploring other people’s religions or cultures, equally interested in exploring both, or not interested in exploring either?**

“Because I’ve been pretty far removed from the Jewish traditions and stuff, I’m curious about what it’s like.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

During your time in college, would you say you are more interested in exploring your own religion or culture, more interested in exploring other people’s religions or cultures, equally interested in exploring both, or not interested in exploring either?



N=1,721 (Jewish sample)
N=1,029 (Non-Jewish sample)
N=459 (Low Affect)
N=625 (High Affect)

Jewish students and non-Jewish students differ in that the Jewish students are less likely to say they are not interested in exploring religions and cultures. But Jewish students and non-Jewish students are similar in their interest in their own religion/culture versus other people's religions and cultures.

The Jewish students who score low on the *Affect* scale differ significantly from those who score high on the scale. The former group (remember, these are students who feel weakly connected to Jewishness) are split between not being interested in exploring religions/cultures, exploring their own and other people's equally, and exploring just other people's. Only 4% said they are more interested in exploring their own religion and culture. The students with high *Affect* scores differ in two ways. First, they are ten times more likely to say they are more interested in exploring their Jewish identity than the low *Affect* students. And second, they are also much more likely to be interested in studying religion/culture in general. One conclusion from this is that students with high affect toward Jewishness value culture/religion (theirs and other people's) more than those with lower *Affect* scores.

Political party affiliation is, again, strongly predictive of answers to this question (whether or not one controls for Orthodox denomination). Republican students and Democratic students are equally interested in exploring religion/culture, but the Republican students are twice as likely as Democrats to say they are more interested in their own religion/culture and much less likely to say they are interested in other religions/cultures.

“I take a lot of classes that are not part of my major just because I like that exposure [to other cultures]. I genuinely feel like it helps me become a better person, when I’m understanding and acknowledging other cultures and religions.”

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
FEMALE

“When it comes to something religious, I’ll drop almost everything in order to make time for it.”

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
MALE

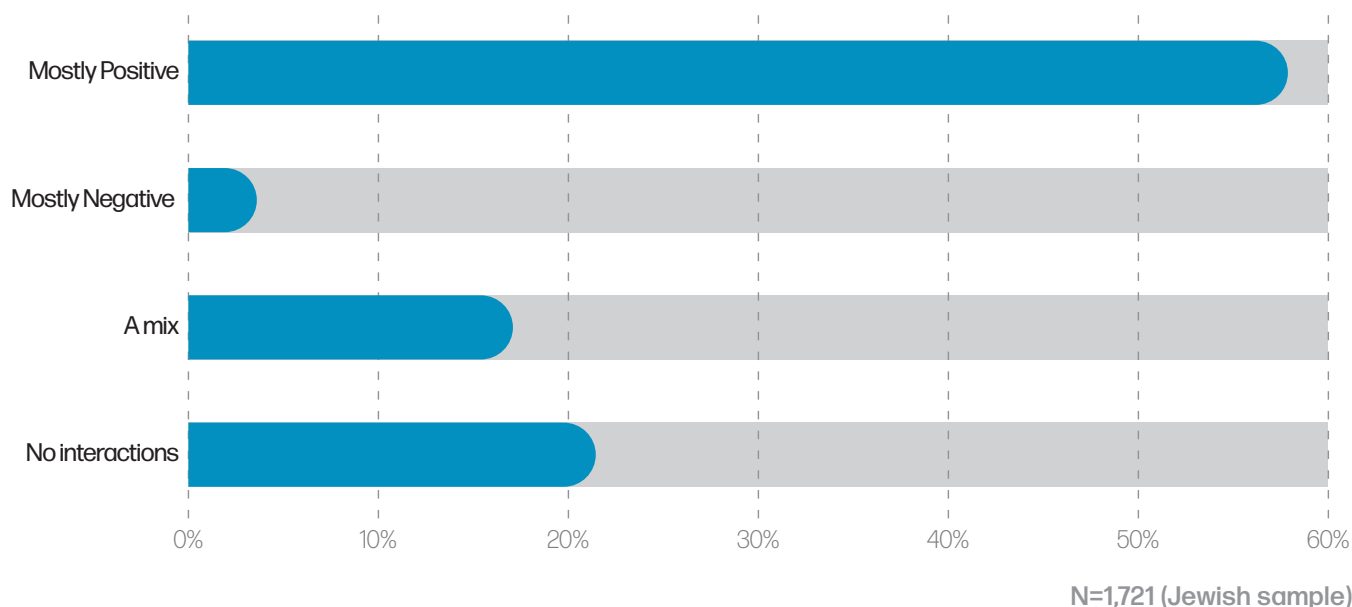
Jewish Programs, Events, and Mentors

I asked students, “How would you describe your interactions with the Jewish community on your campus?” The question does not ask specifically about Jewish programs or organizations on campus (that comes next), but rather asks a more general question about the “Jewish community,” however that is perceived by the respondents.

One in five Jewish students has had no interactions with the Jewish community on their campuses. The majority of the students who have had no interactions with the Jewish community have low scores on *Background* and *Affect*. Only a quarter of the students who have had interactions with the Jewish community have low *Background* and *Affect* scores. Of those who have had interactions, overwhelmingly, they viewed them positively. While 5% said the interactions were mostly negative, 74% said they were mostly positive, and 22% said a mix of positive and negative.

Students who don’t identify as heterosexual/straight were less likely to report positive interactions (52%) compared to heterosexual/straight students (61%). Jewish students of Color who have had interactions with the Jewish community are significantly less likely to have mostly positive interactions (64%) compared to

How would you describe your interactions with the Jewish community on your campus?



White students (77%). The racial differences stem from less positive sentiment among most subpopulations of Jews of Color, including Middle Eastern, Black, multiracial, and Asian students, all of whom reported more negative experiences than White Jews. The Hispanic Jewish students in the sample report similar interactions as White students.

In light of the fact that White and Middle Eastern Jewish students have similar *Background* and *Affect* scores, it is perhaps surprising that the White students are 15 percentage more likely to say their interactions with the Jewish community are mostly positive compared to the Middle Eastern students (77% positive for White students versus 62% positive for Middle Eastern students). There are multiple plausible explanations for this. One is that Jewish communities on campus are more welcoming to the dominant White Ashkenazi population. Another is that the Middle Eastern students are politically much more conservative than the White Jewish students (they are about 30 percentage points less likely to identify as liberal), which could also lead to less positive interactions. And, of course, there are other explanations as well.

Interactions with the Jewish community, though, are not necessarily the same as interactions at formal

events and programs, and as we'll see, experiences at formal programs are quite different according to the respondents.

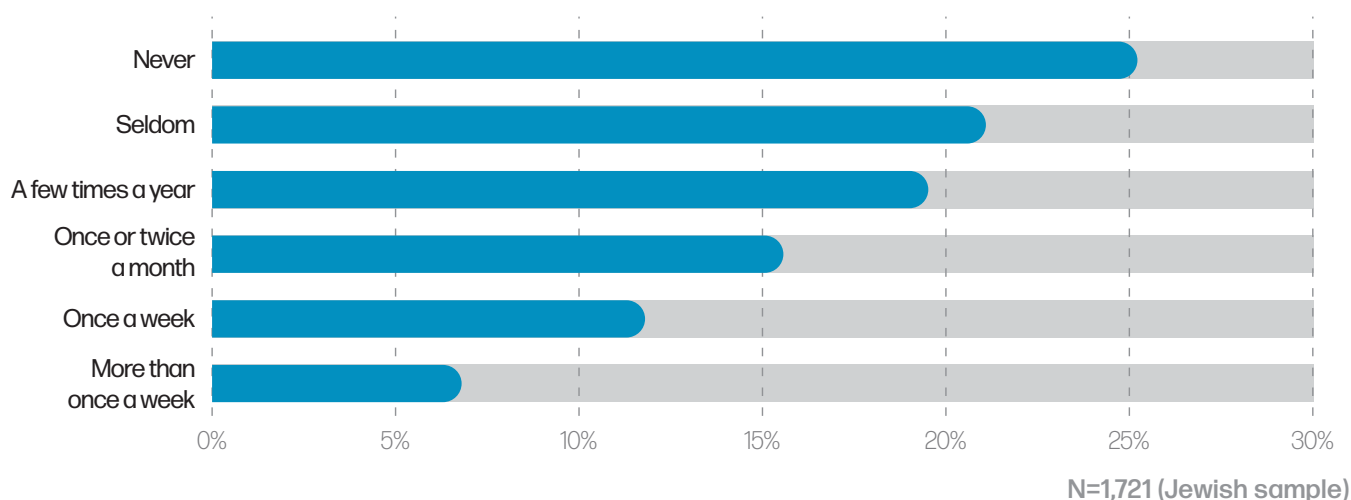
Before analyzing how students feel about Jewish programs, I asked how often students are attending formal Jewish programming on campus.

Just under half (46%) say they never or seldom attend events. About 20% say they attend once a week or more. And the remaining 35% or so report going between a few times a year and once or twice a month.

“You can often go to an event with friends, and then their friends are there so you meet mutual friends. It’s just a great way to meet even more people.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
FEMALE

How often do you attend Jewish events, activities, and programs on campus?



About half of students with high *Background* scores attend Jewish programs at least once a month, and the other half hardly ever if at all attends. Fewer than 20% of students with low *Background* scores attend monthly or more. Most students with low *Affect* or *Background* scores seldom if ever attend Jewish programs.²⁵

While students who attend regularly and do not attend regularly differ on *Background* and *Affect*, they are quite similar in a number of other respects. Apart from their interest in Jewish life on campus, they offered very

“A lot of people who are in Hillel have been doing BBYO or Hillel for years, and they all know each other. I go to school out of state from where I’m from, and they haven’t seemed as receptive to opening up. It seems like a very small group. So, I’ll go when people that I’m friends with go, but I won’t go outside of that.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

similar answers to questions, described above, about how they spend their free time or what extracurricular activity brings them meaning. White Jewish students are slightly *less likely* to attend programs regularly than Jews of Color, with Middle Eastern students and Black students in the sample saying they attend regularly at especially higher rates compared to the White students.

I asked students who have gone to Jewish activities on campus if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“Going to Jewish activities makes me feel like I belong somewhere.”**²⁶

Jewish students who have attended Jewish activities overwhelmingly agree to this statement. In the whole sample, 85% agree (30% strongly agree). While agreement is higher among students with high *Background* scores, agreement with this statement is widespread. For instance, 74% of those with low *Background* scores agree, compared to 83% for medium *Background* and 92% for high *Background* scores. There is also no variation on this question by racial group, with 80-90% of students in all racial groups agreeing to the statement.

“[Hillel] was really helpful to meet new people that weren’t in the same major or the same academic program I was in, but had similar religious beliefs or had similar backgrounds to me with being Jewish.”

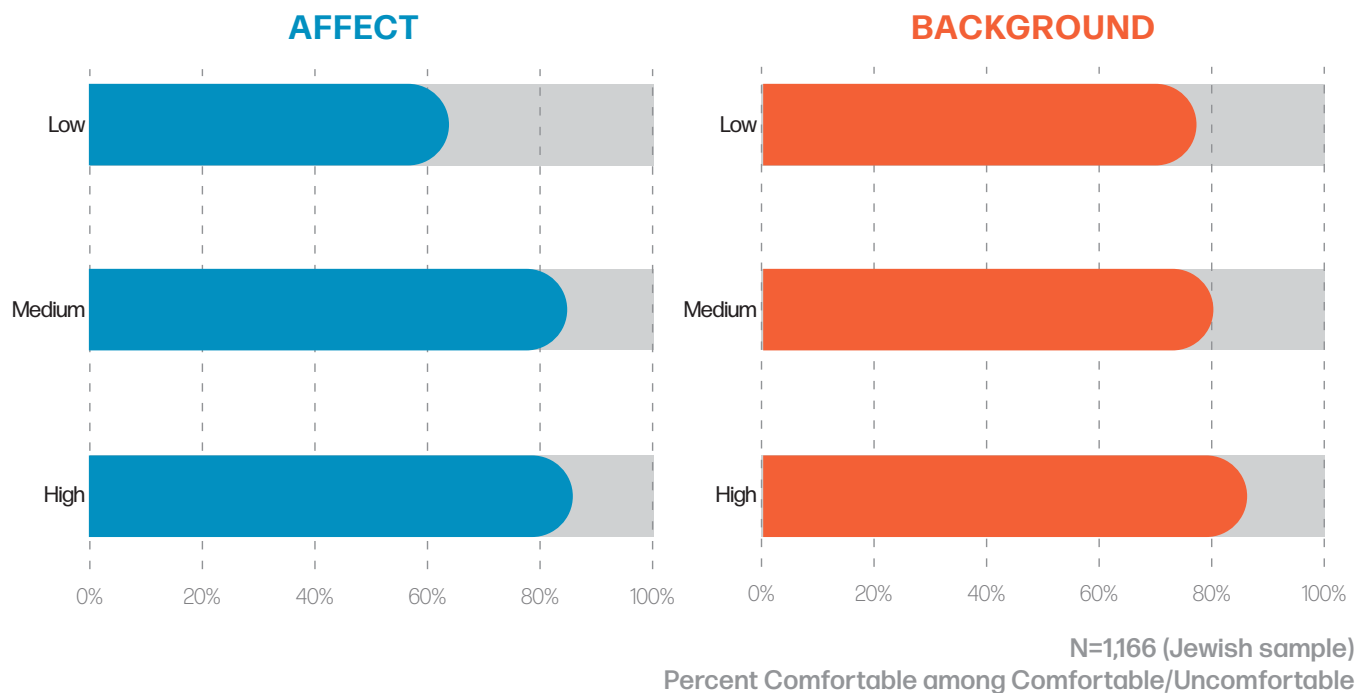
OHIO STATE
MALE

In another question, I tried to gauge the students' feelings about Jewish events in a different way. I asked if they felt mostly comfortable or mostly uncomfortable at Jewish events, activities, and programs, or they could say they have not attended such events. I then asked them a follow-up to explain their answer in their own words.

Most students who attend Jewish programs, regardless of their background or affect toward Jewishness, are comfortable at these programs. However, those with low *Background* and *Affect* scores are less comfortable

than those with higher values on these scores. Students who are heterosexual/straight and cisgender are more likely to report being comfortable, but the vast majority of students in all gender and sexual orientation categories report being comfortable. By race, Middle Eastern and Hispanic students report being most comfortable (89% in both cases, N=53 for Middle Eastern, N=44 for Hispanic), followed by White students (84%, N=879). Seventy-eight percent of multiracial students (N=78), 70% of Asian students (N=44), and 70% of African American students (N=20) report being comfortable.

How comfortable do you feel at Jewish events, activities, or programs on campus?



“I feel sometimes if I were to go to an event hosted for Jewish students that I would be an impostor, or that I wouldn’t know the right religious terminology and would disrespect someone.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

In an open-ended question, I asked students to explain why they feel mostly comfortable, why mostly uncomfortable, or why have they not attended any programs.

Here’s what they said:

The students who answered that they feel mostly comfortable at Jewish events noted that they feel welcome in Jewish spaces. In the words of one of the respondents, “I feel comfortable because they are always so welcoming and it’s easy to relate to one another and socialize with new people.” These students paint a picture of walking in the door and immediately feeling at home. In fact, many students note that participating in Jewish events makes them comfortable because the activities and community remind them of home.

The students who answered that they feel mostly uncomfortable at Jewish events also pointed to the community. These students often feel as though there is a small window at the beginning of college to meet other Jewish students and once the opportunity has passed, another one does not arise. Students also

noted that Jewish life on campus feels as though it is for students who grew up in religiously observant households and not for those with different Jewish backgrounds. As one of the respondents noted, “Most of the people have known each other for a long time and have had many more Jewish experiences than me.”

The students who have not attended Jewish events had three main reasons why they don’t go: they don’t know about Jewish events, they have limited time and prioritize other activities, and they do not feel as though they are Jewish enough for Jewish life on campus. “I do not feel like I’m religious enough,” one respondent wrote. Another wrote, “Lack of time as school and other commitments fill my schedule.”

Focusing specifically on Jews of Color, students who feel uncomfortable had a range of reasons, from not feeling like they know enough, to sensing political tensions among students with different viewpoints,

“I would like to be more involved especially around holidays and to celebrate the culture a lot more, but I think the fear of not being Jewish enough, even though that’s contrived, has probably stopped me from being more involved in the community.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

to feeling out of place on account of their race. As one student put it, “Being biracial is really tough in Jewish communities that are predominantly white – there’s feelings of not belonging and isolation.” Another wrote, “I sometimes feel looked down upon as a black convert.” These statements are important to note; however, they are quite rare among Jews of Color in the sample. Many more Jews of Color observe the welcoming environment in Jewish spaces on campus, pointing to inclusiveness, diversity, sense of community, feelings of acceptance, and connection to like-minded peers.

For many students, part of their connection to the Jewish community on campus is their relationship with a Jewish professional on campus. I asked students, “Does a mentor or trusted adult on campus know you by name?” The students could select up to three categories related to Jewish communal leadership (“Hillel Rabbi”, “Chabad Rabbi”, “Another Jewish community professional (e.g., Hillel Staff)”). The students could also select other mentors such as academic advisor, a residential adviser, or a spiritual leader of a different faith tradition.

One-third (32%) of the Jewish sample reported that a Jewish professional knows them by name. More students who have high scores on *Affect* or *Background* say a Jewish professional knows their name compared to those who have low scores on these scales (50-56% versus 12-15%).

The Jewish professional that the largest share of students thinks knows them by name is a Hillel rabbi (27%), followed by another Jewish professional such as a Hillel staff-member (19%), followed by a Chabad rabbi (12%).

The overlap between students who say a Hillel rabbi knows them and a Chabad rabbi knows them is informative. Most students who are known by a Chabad rabbi are *also* known by a Hillel rabbi (56%). However, most students who are known by a Hillel rabbi are *not* known by a Chabad rabbi (25%). This suggests that Chabad mainly has relationships with students who are also integrated into Hillel, while most of the students with whom Hillel has relationships are not integrated into Chabad. But this point shouldn’t be overstated. For over 40% of students known by a Chabad rabbi, they are *not* known by a Hillel rabbi.

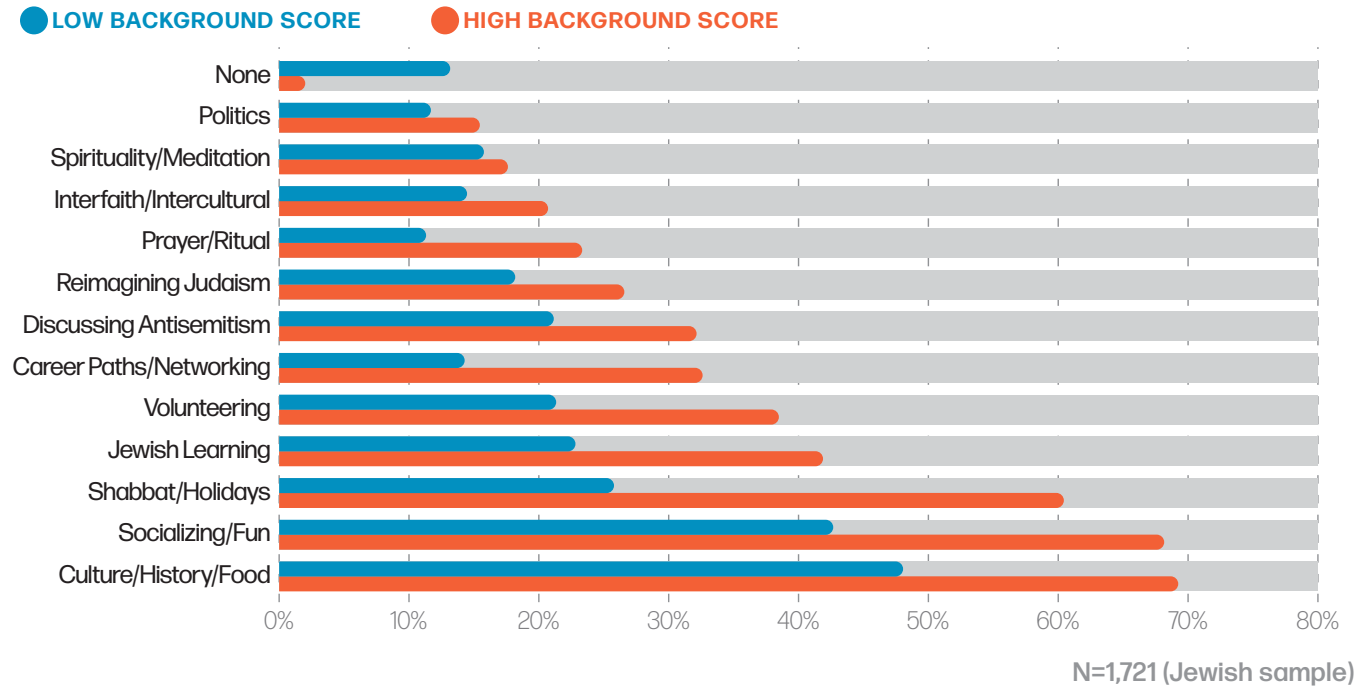
Nearly a third (28%) of Jewish students say they wish they had a stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. It is the students who have higher *Background* and *Affect* scores that are most likely to want this. Those with low *Background* scores are half as likely to say they want a stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor than those with high *Background* scores. Whereas 8% of students with low *Affect* say they wish they had a stronger relationship, 45% of students with high *Affect* report this.

The final question related to Jewish programming on campus invited students to think about what kind of Jewish content would most appeal to them. The

“It’d be cool to have a free place to get Jewish food on campus, available to everyone as well so that other people can explore the food.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

What kind of Jewish programming would most appeal to you?



students could select up to twelve categories. Some categories focused on traditional religious offerings (Shabbat programming, prayer, Jewish learning), some focused on social and cultural offerings, and some focused on less traditional content such as “reimagining what it means to be Jewish”, “spirituality and meditation”, or “career path and networking”.

The most popular item for students was “culture, history, food” (58%), followed by “socializing and fun” (54%) and “celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays (42%). Perhaps the most illuminating finding is that students from more traditional backgrounds are more interested in every topic (even the less conventional ones) than students from less traditional backgrounds. There is not a single program idea –not politics or career networking, not meditation or interfaith programming – that students from less traditional backgrounds want more than students from more traditional backgrounds.

“Having a mix of [religion and cultural community] is pretty important to Jewish community and I don’t think one can really thrive without the other.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

“They have something called Shabbat 2000, which is where they try to recruit 2000 different people, mostly Jewish, but Jewish and non-Jewish, affiliated and not so affiliated, to come go to Friday night services, where everybody sits together and prays, and then after you sit down and eat amazing food, and I think it’s such a perfect event...I think an event like that, which not only creates a type of atmosphere that Orthodox students and affiliated students are looking for Friday night, but a safe space for their less affiliated friends and for non-Jews to come and experience that as well, and really just soak in what I personally think happens to be my favorite night of the week, which is Friday night.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
MALE

“We have a Shabbat 1000... and that was so fun. And it was so nice to see a lot of my non-Jewish friends get to experience Shabbat dinner and stuff.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
FEMALE

“I feel like the [ideal] event that I would have is literally a replication of Shabbat 2000 that was at my school.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
FEMALE

“There are Shabbat dinners held on my campus, but as far as I know, they’re usually about like 50 people, I’m definitely very far off from the Shabbat 1000 or Shabbat 2000 on the rest of your campuses. But, I think holding a larger scale one...would be would be really nice. And just like a good way to introduce things.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

NOTE. The first comment above appeared in one focus group. The three other comments appeared in a separate focus group. These comments arose organically from the student participants.

Social Penalties For Participating In Jewish Life

Given that about two-thirds of Jewish students do not regularly attend Jewish activities on campus (and close to half seldom or never attend), I next explore the question of whether the politics on campus affects the students' willingness to participate in Jewish life. Are campus political climates (particularly as they relate to the Israel-Palestine conflict) so toxic that students feel they pay a social cost for participating in Jewish life?

“Sometimes it does get overwhelming, because Israel is so attached to Judaism and the religion itself that when there’s a bunch of people protesting on the main street of your school, it does feel like it’s attacking a part of yourself if you connect to Israel, like I do.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

Consider the following questions on the survey.

Students were asked if they agree with this statement:

I worry that people make unfair judgements about me because I’m Jewish. Fifteen percent said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, half (49%) of students agreed to this statement, with higher agreement among those who attend Jewish programs at least monthly (56% agree) than those who attend programs less frequently than monthly or never (46% agree).

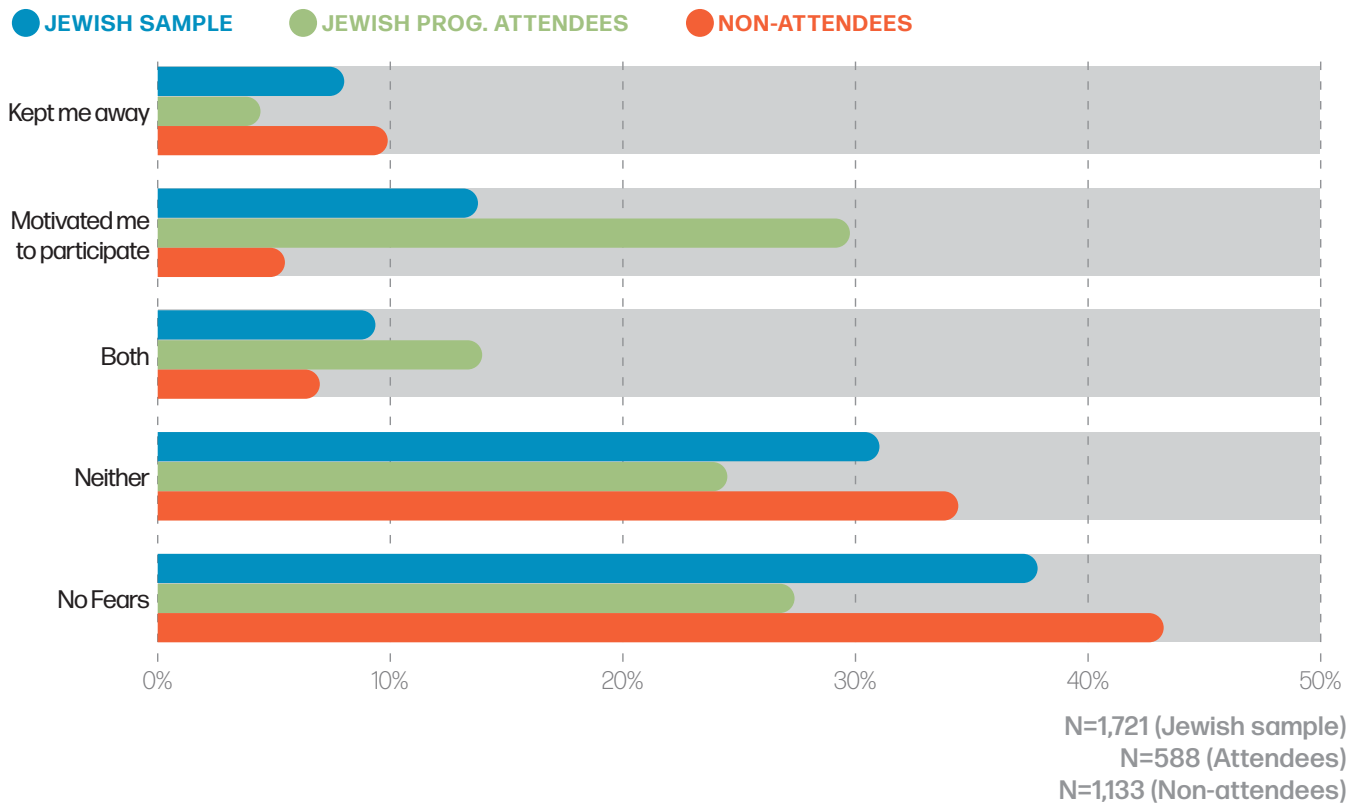
Next agree/disagree question: **People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.** Seventeen percent said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, just under a quarter (23%) of Jewish students agreed to this statement. Agreement is slightly higher among those who attend Jewish programs regularly (26%) versus those who do not (22%).

Another agree/disagree question: **In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.** Fifteen percent said they didn’t know. Of those that agreed or disagreed, 17% of students agree, and again, agreement is slightly higher among those who regularly attend programs (21%) as those who do not (15%).

Agreement with all three of the above questions is higher on public school campuses than in private schools. For example, 13% of students at private colleges or universities feel like they need to hide that they are Jewish to fit in, compared to 21% of Jewish students at public schools.

I asked if fear of antisemitism has kept the students away from Jewish activities, motivated them to participate in Jewish activities, both, neither, or if they have no fears of antisemitism on campus. About 2 in 5 students (38%) said they have no fears, and a third (31%) said that antisemitism did not affect their participation either way. The students were split between saying antisemitism motivated them (14%), kept them away (8%) and both (9%). Compared to students who attend Jewish programming regularly, the students who do not participate regularly were both more likely to say they

Fear of antisemitism on my campus has...



don't fear antisemitism and to say that antisemitism kept them away. Indeed, 10% said it kept them away, which is twice the rate of students who attend regularly.

Students with low scores on the *Background* and *Affect* scales are substantially more likely to report they have no fears of antisemitism, and that antisemitism does not affect their behavior. About 80% of those with low *Background* or *Affect* scores fall into these categories, versus about 65% of those with high *Background* or *Affect* scores.

None of the above questions mentioned politics or Israel. Rather they asked in general about campus climate. I also asked several questions about Israel. I asked the students if they agreed with this statement: **“On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.”** Note that this question-wording is not asking about student support for any political party or policy position within Israeli politics. It merely asks if the students pay a penalty for supporting the existence of the Jewish state.

“Issues on my campus and other campuses have made me hesitant to participate in explicitly Jewish spaces, as opposed to just spending time with my Jewish friends and doing something together.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

“I think a lot of people look at the situation and think, ‘Oh, you’re Jewish. So you’re Israeli, so you believe in what they’re doing.’ Whenever someone says that to me, I usually kick back at them. And I’m like, ‘Look at American politics. Do you agree with everything that our president is doing? Or the previous president did? Because we’ve had very polar politics here in the last year.’ A lot of people don’t agree on anything.”

OHIO STATE
MALE

“One of the things that I also experienced a lot is everybody expects you as a Jew to have an opinion, and people that I’m not very close to will come up to me and ask, ‘So what are your thoughts? Can you explain it to me?’”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

“I’m often expected to have an opinion on [Israel] and readily share that opinion. And people think I do because I am Jewish, even though I personally have pretty much no connection to Israel.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

“I don’t feel any need to conceal my identity where I study, and I don’t feel like there’s a suppression of any kind of opinion on either side.”

TULANE UNIVERSITY
MALE

“I tend to not project my Judaism. Obviously, if someone asked me what my religion is, then I answer honestly, but I find that people tend to then assume things about my experiences, my background, my political beliefs, which is just a little off-putting. I like to be able to craft my own identity and not have it tied to something that I can’t control... I’ve struggled in the past with feeling like I can’t escape my Jewish identity in times that I might want to, just because I don’t feel like I fit in so well.”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

Thirty-nine percent of Jewish students said they didn’t know. Of those who agreed or disagreed, the majority of Jewish students agreed with this statement (54%), with higher agreement among those who regularly attend Jewish programs (59%). Unlike the question about hiding one’s Judaism, where agreement was higher on public campuses, the social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel is similar on private campuses (55%) and public campuses (53%). However, the rate of agreement varies dramatically by campus. For instance, among the 22 students at Tulane who answered this question, only 5% agreed. But among the 24 students at Tufts who answered the question, 79% agreed. Other schools with large Jewish populations were in the middle (e.g., 38% at Ithaca College (N=32), 57% at Ohio State (N=46), 62% at University of Chicago (N=21) and 64% at University of Vermont (N=64)).

The non-Jewish students corroborated what the majority of Jewish students reported. I asked the non-Jewish students if they agreed with this statement: **I wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.** Most of the non-Jewish students said they didn’t know (56%). Of those who shared an opinion, 13% said yes. This number was higher (18%) among non-Jewish students who study at the ten college campuses that had the most Jewish respondents.

“I think my political ideology is a little too far left for a lot of Jewish organizations”

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
FEMALE

A more strongly worded agree/disagree question asked the non-Jewish students: **“I avoid socializing with Jewish students because of their views about Israel.”** To this question, 34% reported they didn’t know. Of those who said they did know, only 2% said yes. So, while almost one in five non-Jewish students (at campuses with large numbers of Jews) say they wouldn’t want to be friends with someone who supports the Jewish state, many fewer say that they avoid socializing with Jews. At the same time, the high rate of “I don’t know” responses on these simple questions suggests that the rate of agreement might be higher than the survey takers are letting on.

I asked the students, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, about their basic view on Israel. Agree or disagree: **Personally, I don’t think there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine.** Most of the Jewish students have an opinion about this; 36% said they didn’t know.

Among the Jewish students who have an opinion, 26% answer that Israel should not continue to be a Jewish state and 74% said Israel should continue to be a Jewish state. These percentages are the same on the campuses with the most Jewish students as on campuses with few students in the sample.

Responses vary dramatically by *Background* and *Affect*. Among those with low *Affect* scores, 41% do not think that there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine (including 18% who strongly hold this position). Among those with high scores on *Affect*, 16% do not think there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine (including 8% who strongly hold this position). Among those who say their Jewish identity is very important to them, 21% agree that there shouldn’t continue to be a Jewish state. Among those who say their Jewish identity is not at all important to them, 57% of agree that there should not continue to be a Jewish state.

Of the students who think Israel should continue to exist as a Jewish country, 60% agree with the statement that students on campus pay a social penalty for

supporting the existence of a Jewish state. Interestingly, almost half (46%) of the Jewish students who do not support the continuing existence of a Jewish state also agree that students pay a social penalty for supporting Israel. The social penalty is not something that is just in the heads of Jewish students who support the existence of Israel.

The non-Jewish students were asked the question of whether Israel should exist as a Jewish country. In the non-Jewish sample, 68% said they didn’t know. Of those who did have an opinion, more of them (31%) – but not many more – agreed with the position that is opposed to the existence of a Jewish state compared to the Jewish students.

After asking the students about their position on the existence of a Jewish state, I asked whether their friend group has similar views. Specifically, I asked them whether they agreed/disagreed with this statement: **My views about Israel are generally in line with the views of most of my college friends.**

“I like to know that there are two sides to the issue and I personally don’t mind when somebody says that they have a different political opinion to like me. I just really wish that the same courtesy could be extended to me.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

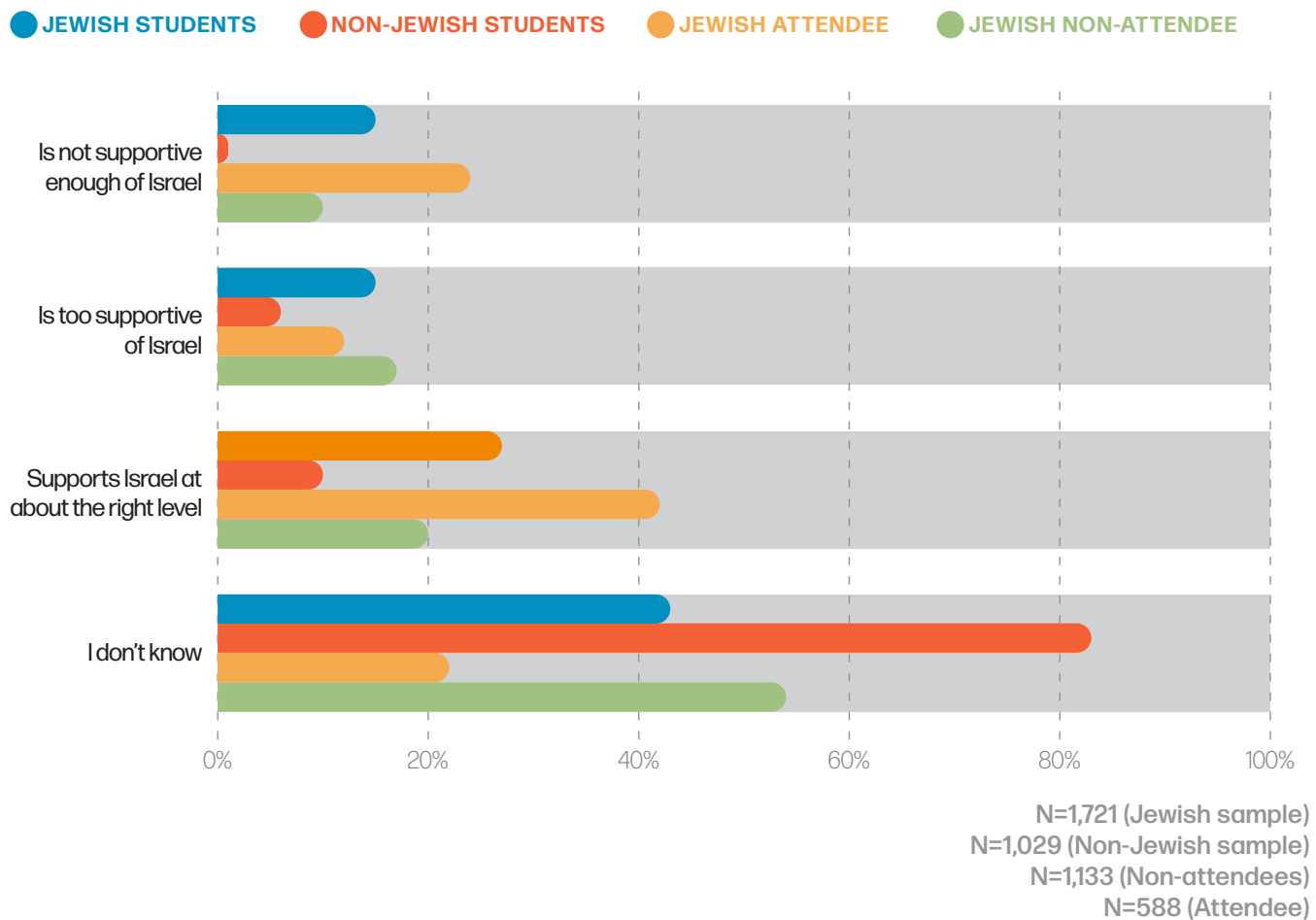
The results suggest that the students opposed to the existence of Israel as a Jewish state are in more homogenous social bubbles than the students who support the existence of Israel. Of the Jewish students who said they do not support a Jewish state, 80% said their views are in line with their friends. Of the Jewish students who said they support a Jewish state, 58% said their views were in line with their friends. The same pattern is true among the non-Jewish respondents. If they are opposed to a Jewish state in Israel, 86% said their views are aligned with their friends. If they support a Jewish state in Israel, 75% said their views are aligned with their friends.

Finally, I asked the students if the Jewish community on campus was supportive enough of Israel, too supportive, about right, or they didn't know. About

6 in 10 Jewish students had an opinion about this. The plurality thought that the Jewish community on campus was about right on Israel, with numbers evenly split between feeling like the Jewish community was too supportive and not supportive enough. Responses varied by level of engagement: of those who attend Jewish programs at least monthly, 42% think the Jewish community is getting it right, but they are twice as likely (24%) to say the community isn't supportive enough of Israel as they are to say the community is too supportive (12%). The opposite pattern emerges for those who do not attend events, though the majority of these students say they don't know.

The non-Jewish students overwhelmingly do not know the campus Jewish community's relationship to Israel; over 80% couldn't say. However, more of them believe

The Jewish community on campus....



the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel than not supportive enough. On the ten campuses with the most Jewish respondents, 12% of non-Jewish students said the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel, compared to 2% who said it's not supportive enough.

Conclusions

This report showcases that for all the challenges in understanding today's Jewish college students and connecting to them, there are real opportunities. Today's Jewish college students – from many different kinds of backgrounds – are saying that they care about their Jewish identity, they want to explore their Jewish religion and culture while in college, and to the extent that they've been to Jewish programs, they've found joy and comfort there. Community-building is never easy, but despite the challenges, Jewish organizations that are seeking to make an impact on college campuses are pushing at an open door.

Students who encounter Jewish organizational life on campus tend to give it high marks. They go to a Hillel program or other Jewish event, and most of them encounter an atmosphere they find positive and welcoming.

At the same time, the students from more engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *more*, and the students from less engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *different*.

The students who come from engaged backgrounds care a lot about their Jewish identity. They want to explore that identity more in college. They want a range of programs. Many of them who already know a Jewish mentor on campus want an even stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. The students are happy with Jewish life on campus, *and* they want more.

Many of the students, particularly those with stronger Jewish backgrounds, have free time that they could be dedicating to developing their personal and communal relationship with Judaism. Right now, they are mostly spending their free time informally socializing. For students who are seeking deeper relationships and intellectual growth, there is a vacuum to be filled. Jewish programs and leaders may be able to fill that vacuum.

“I feel like my school overwhelmingly supports Palestine, and so I’m hesitant to say my beliefs. My school has developed a culture and doesn’t like it or take kindly when someone expresses an opinion that is not part of the norm. It’s not a symptom of anything uniquely Jewish, it’s just that my school has a culture and likes it when people stay in line, and it just so happens that the school culture supports Palestine.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

“I always kept Shabbat to the best of my ability while I grew up, and I looked at it as somewhat of a burden and a hindrance because I couldn’t do any schoolwork. But my first weekend on campus, I had a crazy week and a ton of work. And the second Shabbat started, I sat down, I let out a sigh and I realized that for the next 25 hours, I could take a mental health break. And I got a whole newfound appreciation and respect for it.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
MALE

The large group of students who come from less traditional backgrounds and do not regularly, if at all, participate in Jewish life on campus seem to want something different than is being offered to them. If they have attended a Jewish program, they have mostly liked it, but most of them hardly ever attend such programs. While Jewish identity is interesting to them and somewhat important in their minds, they have not given Jewish activities a priority in their lives.

Could a different kind of program draw them in? A program that isn’t dominated by students who are “more Jewish” than them? A program that doesn’t assume background knowledge or existing social networks?

Perhaps, less traditional students have such different backgrounds from more traditional Jewish students – limited educational and cultural knowledge, Jewish rituals blended with other religions – that these students need entirely different programs and mentors than the ones who serve the more traditional students. While campus organizations strive to integrate communities and create connections – and some programs appear to do an excellent job at this – they must balance that goal with serving the needs of different kinds of students in different ways. A campus organization that tries to meet the needs of traditional students who want *more* and the needs of non-traditional students who want *different* may be asking too much, given the life experiences of the students from these different backgrounds.

No matter the background of Jewish students, the campus climate around Israel is proving to be toxic. A surprisingly high percentage of Jewish students interviewed in this study feel their Jewish identity and activities carry a social burden for them. A quarter of them feel they are judged if they go to Jewish programs. Half of them feel they pay a social cost if they support a Jewish state in the land of Israel. Even without these political issues, it is challenging to convey to students the value of Jewish life. But with the political issues, the barrier to engagement seems higher, particularly for students already on the fence about whether or not to participate.

ENDNOTES

1. In 2021, College Pulse, sponsored by Hillel and the ADL, asked questions to Jewish college students about campus climate issues. That survey asked different questions than are asked here. The closest parallel is between an ADL-Hillel item that asked if students “felt the need to hide your Jewish identity from others on campus” and one of the questions here that asked if students agreed that, “In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.” Fifteen percent of the Jewish students said yes to the ADL-Hillel item, which is nearly identical to the 17% who answered affirmatively to the question here. For more see: “The ADL-Hillel Campus Antisemitism Survey: 2021,” October 20, 2021.
2. Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe, *Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus*, Avi Chai, 2006.
3. Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
4. Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion and Young People 2021*, 2021.
5. Alexander Astin, et al., *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose*. Higher Education Research Institute, 2007.
6. Sales and Saxe (2006).
7. Eitan Hersh and Laura Royden, “The Young American Left and Attitudes about Israel,” *Contemporary Jewry* 2022.
8. Dov Waxman, “Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS,” *Israel Studies*, 2017.
9. Annette Koren, Leonard Saxe, and Eric Fleisch, “Jewish Life on Campus: From Backwater to Battleground,” in *American Jewish Year Book 2015* (Eds. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin), Springer, 2015; Astin, et al., 2007.
10. Graham Wright, et al., “Trends in Jewish Young Adult Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism in America from 2017 to 2019,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 2021; Leonard Saxe, et al., “Hotspots of Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Sentiment on US College Campuses,” Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2016; Graham Wright, et al., “The Limits of Hostility: Students Report on Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Sentiment at Four US Universities,” Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2017; Leonard Saxe, et al., “Antisemitism and the College Camous: Perceptions and Realities,” Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2015; Sales and Saxe, 2006; Mark I. Rosen, et al., “The Hertog Study: Chabad on Campus,” Hertog Foundation, 2016.
11. College Pulse, “Free Expression on College Campuses,” Knight Foundation Report, May 2019; Anti-Defamation League, “The ADL-Hillel Campus Antisemitism Survey: 2021,” 2021.
12. In its 2020 Portrait of American Jews, Pew found that 40% of Jews identify as having no religion.
13. See, e.g., Richard Reeves and Ember Smith, “The Male College Crisis is not just in Enrollment, but Completion,” *Brookings*, October 8, 2021.
14. See p.175, Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 2021. Note, the term “Jews of Color” is used in this report, as it is the preferred terminology of the Jim Joseph Foundation.
15. See p. 196, Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 2021.
16. Adapted from a question asked in *Atlantic* 57, “Unlocking the Future of Jewish Engagement,” 2020.
17. Adapted from a question asked in Rosov Consulting, “GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting with Jewish Teens Today,” 2019.
18. I use a principal component analysis to create this scale. To create the scale, I make the following adjustments to the five variables discussed above. The first variable is coded 1-5 by category. The second variable is a count, 0-11. For the third variable, denomination, I recode respondents as 1 if they have a denomination and 0 if they are “just Jewish” or other. For the parent/guardian question, I recode respondents as 0 if they have no Jewish guardians, 0.5 if they have one Jewish guardian, and 1 if they have two Jewish guardians. Other religious practices are coded 1 if no other religion was practiced and 0 if another religion was practiced. The five variables load onto one factor (Eigenvalue = 2.7). The next factor would have eigenvalue of 0.8.
19. Margolis, 2018.
20. Again, I use principal component analysis to make this scale. The first measure is implemented as a count. The second measure takes values 1-4 from not all important to very important. The third measure takes value of 1 if respondents said very/somewhat positive and equals 0 otherwise. The fourth measure is a count, 0-4, of the number of the four Jewish items were important to the respondent. The variables load onto one factor with eigenvalue 2.3. The next factor would have eigenvalue 0.8.
21. These racial categories exclude categories of American Indian (N = 17), native Hawaiian (N=7), as well as individuals who identified their race as Other (N=54). The “Other” category is complicated by the fact that some individuals who identify their race as “Jewish” on surveys would select Other from the list of available choices on the College Pulse question.
22. Tobin Belzer, et al, “Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color,” *Jews of Color Initiative*, 2021.
23. Pew Research Center, “Where Americans Find Meaning in Life,” 2018.
24. See also: Pew Research Center, 2021.
25. This builds off a study that found that students who held leadership roles in their campus Jewish communities came mostly from traditional, Orthodox, and Conservative backgrounds. See Sales and Saxe, 2006.
26. See Rosov Consulting, “Year 2 Evaluation Findings,” *New York Teen Initiative and New York Incubator of Intensive Summer Experiences for Jewish Teens*, 2017.