



Resource Guide for Allies

www.secularsafezone.org

A Program of the Secular Student Alliance





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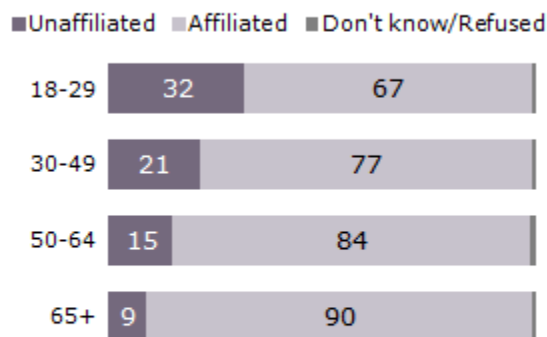


Why We Need Secular Safe Zones

It is not easy to be a nontheist in America today. Although the number of nonbelievers is increasing and acceptance is being fought for, nontheists are still the least-likely group out of those measured in a recent Gallup poll to be voted into office as president. Out of all groups, including LGBT and Muslims, atheists came out at the bottom, with only 54% saying they'd feel comfortable voting for an atheist as president.¹ Things are changing, but there is a lot of work to do. Nontheists are still banned from many cultural and ethnic organizations, including the Boy Scouts of America. Military personnel, including young secular students in JROTC programs and those who are deciding whether or not to join the Armed Forces, face exclusion and proselytizing from their officers, and may be denied promotions.

These sentiments are daunting enough for adults to face, but for secular students, particularly pre-college students, the stigma attached to atheism and the behavior discrimination produces in their peers are often unduly burdensome. The ways in which secular students are moved into an out group are vast. Often common school functions such as being made to say the Pledge of Allegiance, sports-team prayers, and commencement invocations are excluding to secular students. For these reasons and others, many secular students in public schools feel isolated and alone because they are made to feel as though they cannot participate openly and freely in our society.

Religious Affiliation by Age



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The percentage of youth who do not identify with any religion is growing rapidly: a new Pew study estimates the number of religiously unaffiliated people to be at least 30% of 18-29-year-olds².

Still, non-believers *are* a minority, and that label comes with a tremendous amount of baggage.

The Secular Safe Zone seeks to give these students a safe mentor or role model to speak to about the hardships facing nontheists in their environment. It also seeks to challenge prejudice and to foster a world in which secular students are free of discrimination. We are excited that you have chosen to be a part of this program.

How Discrimination against Secular Students Hurts Everyone

You do not have to be a non-theist or a secular student to understand how the discrimination that this silent minority faces every day harms our entire society. This discrimination even harms those who *do* believe in a god. Here are some of those ways in which discrimination against secular students is harmful:

- It discourages theists from forming close relationships with members of the secular student community for fear of being perceived by their religious peers as no longer religious or skeptical.
- It spreads prejudice and rumors about secular students, locking religious students into rigid and false beliefs about their peers.

¹ Jones, Jeffrey M. "Atheists, Muslims See Most Bias as Presidential Candidates." Gallup.Com - Daily News, Polls, Public Opinion on Politics, Economy, Wellbeing, and World. Last modified June 21, 2012. Accessed December 4, 2012. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155285/atheists-muslims-bias-presidential-candidates.aspx>.

² "No Religion' on the Rise: 19.6% Have No Religious Affiliation." Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Last modified October 9, 2012. Accessed November 7, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx#ranks>.



- Such discrimination and the misinformation it spreads allow religious leaders to coerce students into religious beliefs without the students' actual informed consent or consideration.
- It is used to stigmatize theists who dare to question or doubt their religion to try to shame them back into religious belief.
- It uses fear and misinformation to pressure people to treat others inhumanely and encourages them to diminish their basic human rights.
- It often erases the numerous contributions of nontheists to our society, from science to the arts and much more. Being a nontheist means your contributions may never be seen in the same positive manner as someone else who is religious.
- It discourages theists from participating in activities and conversations with nontheists for fear of being seen as a skeptic or nontheists themselves.
- It prevents many human beings from forming a consistent, authentic, and complete self-identity.
- It encourages prejudiced positions not only in terms of nontheism, but can be the bed and encouragement for other forms of prejudice such as homophobia, sexism, and racism.

Purpose of Secular Safe Zone Training

Recognizing that there is a large silent minority of secular students, who are underserved, disenfranchised, and discriminated against is only the tip of the iceberg. It is our goal and mission with this training to educate you on the important issues, terminology, and experiences of secular students in order to make you the best ally you can be.

Within this manual you will find sections on terminology and symbols that may help you identify secular students and understand what they believe. You will also find detailed information on what it is like to experience life as a secular student. You will find frequently asked questions and common myths about secular students, which you can use to help correct misinformation. We'll also show you what you can do to help these young people become better students, leaders, and human beings.

Who Can Participate?

It is our sincere belief that anyone who works with secular students, from high school all the way through graduate training and beyond, can (and should!) participate in this training. This does not only mean educators. We hope to see community, religious, and professional leaders participate, as well as students in leadership positions such as resident advisers and institutional staff.

Who are we talking about? We are happy to train police officers and other agents of the state who work at schools or with secular students in their community. We'd love to see scout troop leaders, and religious leaders such as pastors, rabbis, and others. Business and professional leaders in the community may want to take this training if they anticipate working with students and educators in local schools.

Much of this manual is geared towards education, educators, and students. However, we encourage any and all who wish to participate in the Secular Safe Zone to participate openly and proudly. If you have any questions or wish to express a concern or idea about your particular experience or profession, please contact us at info@secularsafezone.org.

Are YOU Ready to Become an Ally?

We hope by now you realize how working with secular students is essential to promoting diversity. We also hope that since you're reading this manual you are inspired to become an ally to secular students and help enrich and empower their lives. However, as a leader in your community, there are a couple things you should be aware of.

Risks

Firstly, you must know that there are risks that come with associating yourself with the secular student movement. Even if you are not a nontheist yourself, being an ally can have significant effects. All of the discriminatory effects discussed above might be applied to you, and you may experience other consequences.

- You may find people will automatically assume your religious identity. Because you work for and support the equality of secular students, some may assume that you are a nontheist yourself.
- You may find that people question the sincerity of your worldview, if you hold one. Theists may doubt your belief and may ostracize you from your faith community.
- If you are a nontheist and not yet “out,” you may tacitly out yourself by becoming an ally.
- If you are a theist, secular students (and even non-students in the nontheist community) may be suspicious of you despite your support.
- Your morality, values, and character may be questioned by those who believe supporting secular students is inherently wrong.
- Peers, colleagues, and bosses may ostracize you for your support. You may be the topic of suggestions or rumors.
- You may be passed for promotion or advancement. You could also be transferred or experience other types of harassment to your stability in your profession.

Benefits

However, there are benefits as well as risks to becoming an ally. Being an ally to the secular students in your community can be very rewarding, despite the troubles it may cause you. We're sure that you can probably think of many of these potential benefits, but here are a few:

- You are learning the most up-to-date and accurate information there is about secular students.
- You are engaging yourself in a manner that may open you up to more numerous and closer relationships with people.
- You will have opportunities to work with, support, and interact with a group of people who you may not have interacted with otherwise.
- You may become a role model for those who your actions affect. This could be peers, colleagues, bosses, or secular students in your community.
- You have the chance of impacting people's lives and possibly allowing them to find greater value in who they are as a person.
- You may make a difference in the life of a secular student and encourage them not to drop out, abuse drugs or alcohol, or attempt suicide.
- Above all, you empower yourself by taking an active role in supporting the equality of all people. These are the types of actions and support that truly change the world.



There are many factors involved in the decision to become a Secular Safe Zone ally. We are in it for the benefits. We hope you are, too! We get the potential to make a huge difference in a person's life. We get the opportunity to forge closer relationships with those around us and to learn. We may be role models for others and empower them to speak against anti-nontheist prejudice in their own lives.

And we will all help others to reject the insistence from others that their worldview is something of which to be ashamed, and to be comfortable in their own skin. For many, we will help them achieve that feeling for the first time in their lives.

We have the following specific boundaries for maintaining an ally relationship with the Secular Student Alliance:

Expectations of a Secular Safe Zone Ally

- i. You maintain the Secular Safe Zone poster or card prominently in your professional space.
- ii. You have reviewed and understand the training materials available on secularsafezone.org. These training materials provide recommendations and our experience working with secular students.
- iii. Although it should go without saying, follow all laws (including any rules from your campus or institution), and never violate the personal property, privacy, or autonomy of any individual or entity. Further, avoid situations that suggest any form of impropriety. Practically every boundary below is simply an example of these principles.
- iv. Never "out" someone's religious or non-religious identity. Just because a student is "out" to you does not mean they are "out" to everyone.
- v. You should provide support and an open listening environment. However, do not attempt to engage in counseling or therapy at a level expected of a professional counselor or therapist (unless you are, in fact, a licensed counselor or therapist, and are willing to take on that professional relationship).
- vi. If a student reports incidents of bullying, threats of self-harm, or threats of violence, report that incident to the proper authorities as you would any other incident.
- vii. Never engage in romantic, physical, or sexual activities with a student.
- viii. Meet with students only in your professional space, or in a space that is sufficiently open to the public (such as a coffee shop on campus). Do not meet with students in your home, their home, or other secluded areas.
- ix. If you have any questions regarding these boundaries, contact the Secular Student Alliance so we can clarify the boundary based upon your particular situation.

Working With Secular Students: Things to Keep in Mind

Comfort with one's identity comes over time and with much thought and self-reflection. There are ways that you help a secular student feel comfortable so they can get there as easily as possible. Working with secular students can be different than working with other minority groups. Here are some things to keep in mind when reading this manual and working with secular students:

- A secular student may, or may not, want to be involved in the larger secular student movement or the larger secular movement.



- A secular student does not represent the entirety of any group. They are individuals and the views and ideas they express are their own.
- A secular student may not want to be an educator to allies. They may feel uncomfortable answering questions or being put on the spot. They may tire of being asked questions.
- A secular student may be a member of more than one group that faces discrimination (for instance, they may be a nontheist and a member of the LGBT community).
- A secular student may not use the same words as we do in this manual to describe themselves or they may not use them the same way.
- A secular student can (and may) be prejudiced themselves.
- A secular student can become anxious, irritable, exhausted, or annoyed from living in a culture that is dominated by the religious.
- A secular student may not wish to adopt the values and attitudes of those in the dominant culture.
- On the other hand, a secular student may share some of the values of the dominant culture.

Identifying and Understanding Secular Students

This section focuses on the symbols, terminology, and experiences of the secular student. By understanding some of these basic issues, you can come to understand not only how to recognize secular symbols and words, but also how to empathize and understand what it is like to be a secular student in today's world. Both of these are essential in working with and empowering these students.

How can you tell if someone is a secular student? There is no stereotype for what a secular student looks like. The only way to know for sure is if a student decides to confide their identity in you. However, there are some common terms and symbols that may help you identify secular students and will help you understand them if they do decide to confide in you.

Terminology

- **Secular:** Secular denotes those things which are not concerned with or connected with religion. So, a secular student is one who is not connected or concerned with religion in their daily lives. There are, however, several other definitions which more specifically speak about a student's identity. They are:
- **Atheist:** In terms of the word itself, the term atheist simply denotes a lack of belief in a god or gods. This comes from the prefix "a-" which means "without" and the root "-theos" which means "belief in a deity or deities."
- **Agnostic:** This word also comes from the prefix "a-" which means "without" and "-gnostic" which is a word referring to knowledge and its existence/nature. Therefore, an agnostic is a person that believes there is certain knowledge we, as humans, cannot be privy to because of the nature of that knowledge. One can be an agnostic and also be a nontheist or a theist.
- **Secular Humanist:** A secular humanist is an individual that embraces human reason, ethics, social justice, and philosophical naturalism, while specifically rejecting religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience or superstition as the basis of morality and decision-making. Individuals using this label may drop "secular" and identify simply as a humanist.³

³ "Secular humanism." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Accessed October 29, 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_humanism.



- **Freethinker:** A term that means an individual who eschews religious dogma and scripture in making decisions about what they choose to believe and what worldview they choose to accept.
- **Pastafarian:** Pastafarians are members of the satirical “religion” that claims their god is a great Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM). They stress the similarity between arguments for the FSM and other, more popular deities and often vehemently oppose creationism.
- **Naturalist:** A naturalist is someone who subscribes to a philosophical position that all that exists is (or is caused by) natural phenomena. Therefore, supernatural phenomena (such as miracles, deities, and ghosts) are necessarily incoherent and nonexistent.
- **Nontheist:** A nontheist is an individual who does not identify as a theist. They are not necessarily without a belief in spirituality or even a deity, but do not adhere to any organized definition of theism. They may identify as an atheist, secular humanist, agnostic, or may simply call themselves nonreligious. They may also be Wiccans, animists, Buddhists, or another religion/belief system that does not have a specific deity.
- **Nones:** The term “nones” refers to the growing segment of the population who claim no religious affiliation. These individuals are not necessarily nontheists, but do not identify with organized and or mainstream religion.
- **Skeptic:** Skeptics are individuals who use the scientific method and reason to evaluate claims about the supernatural.

There are some other terms which will be helpful to understand as we continue our training.

- **Theist:** A theist is an individual who has a belief in a god or gods.
- **Deist:** A deist is an individual who believes in a deity that is either not concerned or aware of humanity or is no longer present or existent in our universe. These individuals typically believe a god created the universe, and then either disappeared or let it run its course without intervening.

Symbols

There are several symbols that you should be familiar with in the secular student movement. They include:

- **The Scarlet A:** The scarlet A is the symbol of the OUT Campaign, which has been adopted by many people as a kind of universal symbol for atheism. It is widely featured throughout the secular student movement.
- **The Happy Human:** The Happy Human is the symbol of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and the American Humanist Association. It is widely recognized as a symbol of secular humanism and is also widely used throughout the secular student movement to represent secular humanists.
- **The Atheist Atom:** This symbol is the official logo of the American Atheists. The bottom of the atom’s orbit is left open as a way to acknowledge that our knowledge about the universe is still incomplete.
- **Flying Spaghetti Monster:** The Flying Spaghetti Monster (or FSM) is the symbol of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster or Pastafarians. It symbolizes their deity, His Most Holy Noodliness, and it is a popular symbol among nontheists.
- **Darwin Fish:** The Darwin fish is a symbol satirizing the fish iconography of Christianity. It stands for the naturalist, Charles Darwin, who originally articulated the



theory of evolution and is a way to show support for the theory and science in general. It is often used to identify those who adopt a naturalist perspective, especially in terms of science and public education.

- **Circle-A Logo:** A symbol representing atheism and nontheists in general. It resembles the scarlet A and is often confused with the symbol for anarchism, but the ideas are distinct and the symbols should not be confused.



- **Secular Student Alliance (SSA) Logo:** The national SSA logo is often used by the Secular Student Alliance's affiliates to identify themselves as both secular students and part of the larger secular student movement. The logo can be altered and may be changed to reflect a school's color or theme, but will generally look the same as the one included here.



- **Ancient Greek "Atheist":** The original use of the word atheist dates back to Ancient Greece. The Ancient Greek spelling of the word (pronounced atheos) is common in atheist circles as a tie to history and philosophy.



Secular Students in Adolescence

Adolescence is an important part of a human being's development for many reasons. Understanding the position of the adolescent can help us better support the students we serve. For most youth, this is a time of experimentation and exploration. They are exploring; not just their choices of friends or what classes to take, but also their beliefs and ideas. Adolescents' social relationships are also shifting from being primarily with their parents to being primarily with their peers. Our goal is to create an environment in which secular students can safely question the ideas of religion and belief, and give them the opportunity to establish interpersonal relationships with like-minded peers.

Psychologist Erik Erikson formulated a theory of human development that can help us understand what it is like to be an adolescent secular student in today's world. Erikson's theory describes eight different stages of life, each corresponding to a specific age group. At each of these stages the individual seeks to learn something about the world and their social role within it. The theory also identifies the significant interpersonal relationships a person seeks to establish at each stage of development. If the individual is successful they will grow psychologically and, in theory, be able to move onto the next stage. They will also be more successful in establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. However, if the individual is hindered or meets with trauma, they will stagnate at that stage and may not be able to establish themselves successfully in their interpersonal or psychological lives.

The stage that adolescents go through is "fidelity." It is the time during which adolescents seek to establish their identity and roles in the world. They are questioning the world and their place in it, asking, "Who am I?" and "How do I fit in?" This not only includes things like political and sexual identity, but also worldview. Regardless of where an adolescent will end up, either theist or nontheist, it is natural and important that, students at this age be able to question religion and its role in their lives.

One of the aims of the Secular Safe Zone program and our allies is to make sure these students are afforded the freedom to explore their worldview safely and successfully. The ostracism and bullying faced by many secular students during this period can slow their psychological development and hinder their well-being well into adulthood.

It is also important that adolescents be able to establish secure interpersonal relationships with other like-minded adolescents as well as with role models who can help them navigate this experimentation and questioning. Through this training, we hope to give you the means to be one of these role models.



Christian Advantage in Today's Society: Through the Eyes of a Secular Student

Understanding the psychological position of a secular student is only one aspect of what it is truly like to be a secular student in today's world. The other is understanding the very real advantages that religious individuals (especially Christians) can expect in our society. This is not always apparent or visible, either to those who benefit from advantage or to those who do not. It is also important to remember that it is seldom intentional and rarely meant to be hurtful. However, it is important to realize that these advantages do exist. We must keep them in mind if we are to understand and help secular students reach their full potential. Some examples of these advantages are:

- It is likely that state-recognized holidays coincide with a Christian's religious holidays. This means that these days will have little or no impact on their education as opposed to students of other worldviews.
- It is acceptable for a religious student (particularly a Christian student) to talk about personal religious beliefs openly in public without fear of being criticized or looked down upon for their ideas.
- For the religious, talking about religious privilege is acceptable and they are not looked down upon as "self-interested" for discussing it.
- The religious can display slogans and messages supporting their beliefs on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and other mediums without fear of vandalism or discrimination.
- The religious are not expected to learn the particulars and beliefs of other religions in order to justify their own.
- The religious (especially Christians) are not likely to be judged by the improper actions and beliefs of others with the same worldview.
- The religious can expect to generally be portrayed by the media in an accepting light.

Common Myths about Secular Students

As an ally, you are likely to encounter many myths about what it is like to be a secular student and what these students believe. In this section we discuss some of the more common myths floating around about secular students. This is to help prepare and equip you with the basic knowledge you will need in order to make your Secular Safe Zone a truly welcoming and open place for secular students to question their beliefs.

1. Nontheists are just angry at god.

Nontheists don't believe in a god, so they can't be mad at a god any more than somebody who doesn't believe in gremlins could be mad at gremlins. Some nontheists are angry about religion and what happens on account of certain religious doctrines or beliefs, but that is different from being angry at a god.

2. Nontheists worship Satan.

Nontheists do not believe Satan exists and therefore do not worship it.

3. Nontheists are arrogant.

Some nontheists are arrogant. Some religious people are arrogant. The truth is that some *people* are arrogant. Most nontheists find the claims of religion unconvincing and are willing to calmly explain why. This is honesty, not arrogance.

4. Nontheists love sinning too much to give it up.

Nontheists, like religious people, generally want to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong. However, nontheists may simply disagree with religious people about whether or not a particular act is

wrong. This is why nontheists generally avoid stealing or bullying just like religious people do but, many nontheists don't believe homosexuality is immoral or sinful, and so they do not treat it as such.

5. Atheism is a religion.

Today, the word "religion" is often interchangeable with the word "worldview." When speaking in this way, people typically mean religion as a way of conceptualizing and framing the world around us. In this sense, atheism can be understood as a "religion," per se, but so could many other things that most people wouldn't consider religions, like political beliefs. This causes the definition of religion to be applied so widely that the word becomes vague and no longer truly explains what most people would consider religion. For this reason, many nontheists choose to define religion more narrowly as a set of centralized dogmatic beliefs and tenets about a supernatural deity and its role in the universe. Under this definition, atheism is not a religion.

6. Nontheists are all angry.

Actually, we're generally happy people. As popular atheist blogger Greta Christina puts it...

So to read an article by an atheist about their anger over religion, and assume that they must constantly be filled with blinding rage and are incapable of experiencing joy or humor or wonder... it's like reading a film review by Roger Ebert, and feeling deep pity for his tragically narrow and limited life, since all he ever does is go to the movies.⁴

7. Nontheists live empty, unfulfilled lives.

Nontheists have lots of things in life that make them happy and fulfilled: friends, family, sports, love, helping make the world a better place, learning new things, etc. The list could go on and on, and in almost every place it overlaps with what makes religious people happy, too.

8. Nontheists have no morals.

Nontheists are typically just as moral as theists. Nontheists, like theists, derive their morals from many different areas including philosophy, role models, experience, family, etc. Typically the only disagreement is over the use of scripture and religious dogma as the basis of morality. Beyond that, nontheists and theists can (and do) typically agree on many aspects of morality and what it means to be a good person.

9. Nontheism is the product of a rough life or personal tragedy (nontheists are somehow messed up).

Tragedies affect all of us, regardless of what we believe about religion. There are a myriad of emotional and rational factors that go into the decision to abandon religion. Some of those do deal with some of the hardships we go through. While these tragedies sometimes make us consider our worldviews in new ways, they do not identify a flaw in nontheists any more than they would a theist who embraces religion due to a personal tragedy.

10. Nontheists wish to convert people away from religion.

Nontheism is not something that people can be converted to. It is a personal decision that takes a lot of thought and consideration. Although many nontheists would like to see more acceptance of nontheists and discussion of religion, this does not necessarily mean that they wish everyone to be nontheist. Many simply wish to coexist with the religious and be accepted for who they are.

11. Nontheists are uneducated about Christianity or other religions.

There can be no doubt that nontheists, on average, know just as much about religion as religious people. According to the 2010 U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Reli-

⁴ Christina, Greta. "Why Are Believers So Hostile Toward Atheists? | Alternet." Alternet | Alternative News and Information. Last modified January 5, 2011. Accessed October 29, 2012. http://www.alternet.org/story/149419/why_are_believers_so_hostile_toward_atheists?paging=off.

gion and Public Life, nontheists are actually more knowledgeable about religion than the religious. For many religions, nontheists knew more about them than the religion's followers.⁵

12. There are no nontheists in foxholes.

This is absolutely false. There are many United States service members, both veterans and currently enlisted, who are openly nontheistic. This rumor not only is untrue but it is a great dishonor and disservice to those service members who have fought for our country, regardless of worldview.

13. Nontheists don't know what it feels like to believe

Many nontheists were religious at one point in their lives, and therefore have most likely experienced religious feelings. The significance and level of truth that a person attaches to those feelings, however, typically differs between nontheists and theists. A nontheist typically recognizes that these feelings can be significant and meaningful, but they see them as emanating from their brain, not from a god. Many nontheists experience the same emotions they once did from religion from contemplating the universe or looking at stars in the sky.

14. Nontheists think they know everything.

Nontheists are typically very honest about the fact that we do not (and cannot) know everything. While theists claim to have the answers to some of the ultimate questions of the universe, nontheists are content understanding that there are still some things that we don't know. So, for example, the question of the origin of life on Earth is still being researched. Theists are content saying that they have already found the answer. Nontheists, on the other hand, are content with saying we don't know yet, but that doesn't mean a god did it.

15. Nontheists have nothing to live for.

Non-believers have lots to live for, most of which religious people would also say they live for. They live to enjoy the company of people they like/love. They live to satisfy their curiosity by learning about the world. They live to experience new things and to take in the wonders of reality – just as religious people do.

16. Nontheists are the reason misfortune befalls America.

There is no evidence to support this position. Bad decisions that result in damaging effects on the United States (or the world) are made by a lot of people of all religions.

However, scape-goating is an effective tactic for creating an out-group. This is why the idea that nontheists are at fault for America's woes is especially worrisome. It contributes greatly to the notion that nontheists, no matter how kind or charitable, are the enemy. This can make life difficult for nonbelievers.

17. All nontheists are rational.

Nontheists are not all rational. Neither are theists. No one is 100% rational all of the time. This is part of being human and has little (if nothing) to do with one's worldview.

18. Nazis were atheists.

This specific claim is historically false. Prior to World War II, about two-thirds of the German population was Protestant and the remainder Roman Catholic⁶. The Nazis even wore belt buckles which bore the words "Gott Mit Uns" which translates to "God is with us."

19. Nontheists think all religious people are stupid.

There have been many intelligent religious thinkers throughout history. Sir Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, and Johannes Kepler are great examples. However, nontheists do think they were wrong about

⁵ "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey - Executive Summary." Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Last modified September 28, 2010. <http://www.pewforum.org/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>.

⁶ "Religion in Germany." German Culture - Customs, Traditions, Language, History, Recipes, Etiquette, and more. http://www.germanculture.com.ua/library/facts/bl_religion.htm.

the existence of god. Even brilliant people can be wrong and there is a very large difference between thinking someone is wrong about a single issue and thinking they're stupid.

20. Nontheism is a phase the nontheist will grow out of.

The presence of 20% of the overall U.S. population that identifies as nonreligious⁷ refutes the idea that atheism is the product of youth.

Secular Students and Cultural Differences

Secular students come from a diverse variety of cultural and economic backgrounds, and it is important to acknowledge that their non-belief is not necessarily the most important part of their identity. It can be more difficult for a student to come to terms with their break from religion and to come out to friends and family if religion is a vital part of their community's culture. This is historically the case in African-American communities as well as for immigrant families, for whom religion provides a lasting connection to one's cultural history. Students from an economically disenfranchised background may also face special adversity in rejecting religion, as the charitable and community-building services that churches provide can make religion similarly vital to their families.

Working with Questioning Students

Not all students who approach you are going to be certain about their worldview. We would even say that most of them are still exploring the ideas and concepts they're currently questioning. In this section we want to discuss some approaches, questions, and ideas about working with students who may be questioning their worldview.

It's important to approach the questioning student in a neutral manner. As Secular Safe Zone allies, we are not here to push either religion or nontheism. We are here to be role models and to help the student think more clearly about the issues they're questioning. We are also here to help them ask the right questions and to encourage them in their questioning. As is often said, it is more important to teach *how* to think, not *what* to think.

We understand that each individual in this program brings their own beliefs and ideas to the table. It is not our mission or goal to silence your opinions or thoughts on subjects, but only to recommend that, as these students are questioning themselves and their role in religion and everyday life, that we try to avoid biasing their ideas or thinking in any particular manner.

This is not to say that if a student is attacking nontheists for how sinful they are that you should not intervene (a topic we'll cover later). Neither are we saying that if a student is mistaken about a particular religion, that you should not correct them. We simply want you, as an ally, to try to be neutral providing information that will assist these students in continuing to honestly and openly question their beliefs and ideas about religion.

Speaking Up – Creating Safe Spaces

The Chronicle of Higher Education published an article in 2009 called "Atheist Students on Campus: From Misconceptions to Inclusion."⁸ From the abstract on the article:

⁷ "No Religion' on the Rise: 19.6% Have No Religious Affiliation." Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Last modified October 9, 2012. Accessed November 7, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx#ranks>.

⁸ Goodman, Kathleen M., and John A. Mueller. "Invisible, Marginalized, and Stigmatized: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Atheist Students." *Intersections of Religious Privilege: Difficult Dialogues and Student Affairs Practice* 125 (2009): 55-63. Accessed October 29, 2012. doi:10.1002/ss.308.



The authors suggest that it is the responsibility of educators to create an environment that encourages atheist students to come forward and share their views. That will require reframing atheism as simply another perspective for exploring purpose, meaning, and morality. Administrators and faculty members should learn more about atheism, including its history and varied definitions; create a welcoming environment for atheist students; include atheism in student programming; ensure that atheists can, like other students, explore their inner development; create safe spaces that are “atheist only” for students; and look to other institutions for best practices.

Speaking up is how we change the world. Do not let fear of mistakes keep you from acting! You will make mistakes, but they’re better than inaction. Creating safe spaces for secular students to question religion and their religious beliefs is what we’re all about. In this section, we’ll get into the actual details on how you can do just that.

Breaking the Silence

Silence implies a taboo. It also implies agreement and reinforces the discriminatory behavior. In 2009, Will M. Gervais published a study which revealed that when atheists are perceived as being prevalent, anti-atheist prejudice is greatly diminished⁹. This means that just by speaking up and letting those around you know that atheists and secular students exist and are people, too, you are necessarily reducing the amount of anti-atheist sentiment in the world.

Responding to Criticism

Unfortunately, being a minority, secular students have to deal with a great deal of criticism from their peers, whether they’re “out” or not. The very fact that these students are questioning the majority beliefs can be seen as hostile, arrogant, and unwarranted by other students, especially those that are religious. Part of building a safe space is creating an environment in which secular students feel that they will not be unnecessarily criticized for their ideas, questions, or beliefs about religion. In this section, we will discuss the type of criticism you may encounter and how to deal with it.

As we said above, daring to question the existence of a god can be daunting and often draws the ire of those around us. This is an effective, if brutal, way of establishing an acceptable range of beliefs the majority will tolerate. This dynamic is meant to put pressure on the offending ideas and make it uncomfortable to question the majority. In our society, the religious majority may discourage individuals from identifying as secular, and make them uncomfortable with their own ideas. Presented with enough resistance, secular students may ultimately hide their identity and rejoin the majority in search of comfort. Regrettably, this tactic is often successful in quieting even honest and respectful dissent and questioning.

A goal of the Secular Safe Zone program is to break down this in-group/out-group mentality and show that being a secular student is OK. By validating the secular worldview as an acceptable one in the continuum of beliefs, the ally brings into question the legitimacy of the in-group’s criticisms and barriers. Using the section on common myths above and becoming familiar with the ideas and beliefs of the secular student movement can help you to respond to criticisms.

So, for example, in class, in your office, or on your dorm floor, you may be discussing religion, morality, and so on. Someone says “Well, nontheists are going to hell anyway.” This type of criticism distinctly creates an in-group and an out-group, drawing a line between what is acceptable to the majority and what it deems unacceptable. In this case, any secular student in the room (“out” or not) hears, “Well, nontheists and their opinions don’t matter because they’re inherently inferior.”

⁹ “Finding the Faithless: Perceived Atheist Prevalence Reduces Anti-Atheist Prejudice.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Last modified February 22, 2011. Accessed October 29, 2012. <http://psp.sagepub.com/content/37/4/543>.



You might counter the above example by saying, “You may believe nontheists are all going to hell, but that is your opinion. Nontheists and their opinions are equally welcome and valid here.”

Bullying of secular students is another reality that many will have to face. Whether they are called names, physically or emotionally assaulted, or just ostracized from their classmates, bullying is a very serious and psychologically harmful behavior, even when it does not involve physical violence. Some of the same criticisms you can expect in the classroom, office, or dormitory can be used to bully nontheists in a setting outside of your view. We will discuss more on how to handle these situations later, but it is important that we recognize that bullying someone for their worldview is still bullying, and should be dealt with in the same manner as bullying someone for their race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

While we encourage our allies to combat biased statements and create safe space for secular students, we advocate the constructive criticism that comes from honest and open discussions. In fact, that type of discourse is often helpful and (as the name implies) constructive in helping people refine and hone their ideas and beliefs. The difference between the two is the target of the criticism. Is the criticism focused on a specific aspect of the idea itself? Or are the comments focused on the person (or group of people) and punishing them for holding certain ideas? The difference should be strikingly obvious.

If you hear a student criticized for asking questions, it is your duty as a Secular Safe Zone ally to stand up and speak out. Also, if you witness or have a bullying incident reported to you, it is absolutely necessary that you take the issue as seriously as you would any other type of bullying and report it to the proper authorities immediately.

Forming a Secular Student Alliance

One of the ways religious students have their community needs met in a scholastic environment is through the formation of school clubs like Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), a Muslim Student Association, etc.

If a number of students have approached you as an ally, you may want to consider being their faculty sponsor in forming a secular club with the Secular Student Alliance. Such a club gives the non-believers a chance to interact with like-minded peers, not only in conversation and camaraderie, but also in trying to make an impact on the world through service projects and other forms of activism.



The Secular Student Alliance (see “Organizations” on page 26) can help with this process. Visit <http://www.secularstudents.org/groupstartingpacket> for more information.

Supporting Secular Students

So far in this manual we have been learning the information necessary to help us understand secular students. This information will provide the necessary background to understanding the ways in which you help secular students. This section covers the methods by which you can use this newly acquired knowledge to begin creating a safe space for secular students. In this section, we will go over “coming out” as a secular student, bullying, anxiety and concerns, and what to do about students who may self-harm.



Coming Out: Identifying as a Secular Student

The phrase “coming out” has been used for many decades by the LGBT community as a term describing someone who has begun openly identifying as LGBT instead of being “in the closet,” or hiding their sexual identity. Today, the secular student movement discusses this process in almost the same way. A secular student may be a nontheist (or any of the other terms we discussed above, too), but not openly identify as such. These students are “in the closet” about their beliefs, while the secular students who openly identify as such have “come out” about their nontheism.

The process of coming out for secular students (as well as LGBT individuals) can be a very difficult and emotionally charged process. It can endanger one’s social status, friendships, economic position, and more. It also potentially involves facing discrimination of all kinds. These factors can cause a great deal of distress for secular students who are trying to decide when to come “out” and to whom. As a Secular Safe Zone ally, part of your responsibility is to assist in this process and ensure a safe space in which students may do it.

Coming out of the closet is typically a two-part process. First, the student must come out to his/herself about their disbelief in a god and come to grips with their identity as a nontheist. This can be an emotionally trying process. The student may have to confront beliefs about nontheists they learned in their childhood. Not every student will have this experience, but it can be difficult for a young person to handle, and even more so if they must handle it alone.

The other half of the process is coming out to others. In most situations the reality of doing something difficult is never as bad as the fears surrounding it. However this is not always true. The reality is that, as a member of an unpopular minority, coming out to others *does* have consequences. It can even have consequences from those closest to us. People really do lose jobs, friends, and even their families over their lack of believe in a god.

Some of the things a secular student considering coming out may be afraid of:

- Losing friendships
- Rejection by their family
- The loss of their faith community
- Rumors and gossip
- Harassment
- Bullying by their classmates
- Physical abuse at the hands of their family
- Losing the financial support of their family
- Being thrown out of their home
- Losing their job

So what motivates someone to come out despite the social and familial pressures they may face?

- They are emotionally exhausted with keeping part of their identity hidden
- To feel closer to those around them who accept them as they are
- To pursue integrity
- To show that being a nontheist is ok

Now that we understand the reasons that someone may come out and how you can help, it is important to understand some of the situations in which this may happen and why they have chosen to come out to you. Some of these reasons may be:

- You because you are a close friend or family member and they want to be open about who they are with you to increase the genuineness of your relationship.
- You may be someone they see as understanding and accepting.
- They may wish to establish an honest relationship with you from the beginning.
- They may be tired of hiding their identity.
- Some aspect of your professional relationship may make it difficult for them to conceal their identity.
- You may be in a position to help them with a particular concern or issue they have.

Regardless of the reason, it is essential as a Secular Safe Zone ally that we recognize that these situations will come up. As a Secular Safe Zone ally you are declaring your class room, office, dorm floor, etc. not only as a safe space, but you are also declaring yourself as a person who is safe to come out to.

Understanding that this can be an extremely taxing situation for secular students means that we must be prepared to make the situation as comfortable and easy for them as possible. Here are some of the ways that we can create a safe space for secular students to come out.

- Listen to them and how they feel.
- Ask questions.*
- Show a genuine and respectful interest in this development in their life.

Remember that nothing about this person has changed. They are still the same person you knew. You just know more about them than you did before.

*Asking questions is fine and encouraged. However, you should not ask questions that would seem like you are trying to push this person in any one direction. Questions such as “How sure are you of your disbelief?” or the like may be viewed as hostile or as an opening to proselytize. Some good questions to ask are:

- Has it been hard for you having to hide this aspect of yourself?
- Is there any way that I can help you?
- How long have you been considering your beliefs?

The key is to not assume that we know what it is like to be this person and what they're experiencing. Only they can tell us - so we should listen and not judge. They may not want you to do anything specific other than just listening. You should consider it a great honor that this person trusts you enough to confide in you about a controversial and difficult identity.

The last thing we wish to discuss here is very important. So important, that we're going to devote a large amount of space to just three words:

NEVER OUT ANYONE.

This is a very simple concept, but it is of the utmost importance. Secular students have a lot to lose by being revealed before they are prepared for it. As we said above, they may lose friendships, scholarships, family support, and much more if it became known that they did not believe in a god. As a Secular Safe Zone ally you are to never disclose the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) of anyone who confides in you without their express permission before hand. This includes not telling others you work with, friends and family, the individual's friends and family.



Dealing with Bullying

For many secular students bullying is a reality they will have to face. In this section, we will briefly discuss how bullying should be handled. As a professional who works with students, we recognize that you have likely already received training on how to handle bullying in your specific capacity. We encourage you to follow that training as you encounter secular students who have been bullied.

If a secular student should report a bullying incident to you, you should allow the student to talk openly about the situation. This means do not censor language, if at all possible. Let them tell the full story of what happened. You should have an open posture that says, "I'm listening and open to your comments." Try not to sit behind a desk or cross your legs or arms while the student is talking. Sit up straight and make eye contact as possible.

Show empathy for the student's situation. Empathy is genuinely feeling what it must have been like to be in that person's shoes (as opposed to sympathy, which is just feeling sorry for someone). Try your very best to show understanding their situation and try not to make them feel that their feelings are invalid. Show this by expressing concern and, helping them figure out a solution. You may try having them rationalize out what precisely happened to cause the events to occur, but be cautious that you don't inadvertently make the student feel like the bullying was their fault.

If the incident hasn't already been reported, ask the student if they would like to report the bullying. As we stressed above, it is expected of Secular Safe Zone allies to handle bullying incidents with the same seriousness and severity that they would handle any other bullying report.

Dealing with Concerns and Anxiety

Being a secular student is not easy. We live in a society that is extremely religious. This can create anxiety and concerns even if a secular student does not experience direct discrimination first-hand. These concerns are very similar to those found with other minorities who live in a culture that rejects and does not understand them, such as LGBT individuals who live in our heteronormative society.

In this section, we'll discuss several different sources of anxiety and concern and what you can do to help.

Guilt

Many secular students face feelings of guilt; however many allies (even nontheists) do not recognize it as a legitimate concern. In this situation the secular student most likely comes from a religious background, even if that background was not deeply entrenched. Many of these secular students struggle with concerns and anxiety that stem from their former faith community. For instance, they may worry about being sent to hell, that they will not get to see their loved ones after they die, or that they are going to be struck down by a vengeful god.

Even though these secular students may not *believe* these things to be true (or likely to be true), the beliefs they have been taught, and the feelings that stem from those beliefs, are very real. For example, one need not believe in ghosts and supernatural monsters to be frightened of scary movies!

As an ally, it is important to listen to these fears and to let the student know that it is perfectly natural to feel this way, even if they truly don't believe this will happen to them. Only by accepting and validating their feelings (and even the fears they may find irrational) will they conquer their former beliefs and the feelings of guilt that stem from them.

Social Concerns

Many secular students are ostracized from their peers. Even if they are not, or if they are not “out” to their friends yet, they may experience a great deal of anxiety over losing those closest to them. For example, their best friend may be very religious or they may have met their significant other through a religious community. These fears are not without merit, but there are ways that you can help the secular student to deal with them.

You may be able to help the secular student understand that even though he or she *may* lose friends over nonbelief, it is not a certain outcome. There is no way of truly knowing what someone’s reaction will be to a friend’s coming out. There are many times in which a friend, even if they are religious, accepts and continues to respect their friend.

If a secular student does lose friends, it is important for them to know that it is okay to feel hurt by this. No amount of telling them that they will make new friends or that the friend that betrayed them wasn’t a *real* friend is going to make that hurt go away. Encourage them to talk about how it makes them feel and to be open and honest about it. By facing this reality head on and being honest about how it will feel, the secular student can be prepared for what may be ahead.

You may also be in a position to help the student put these events into perspective. It is not appropriate right after they have lost a friend to try to allay their grief by telling them they will find new friends. This most often just invalidates their feelings. However, once they have come to terms with their friends leaving them, you can help them understand that they are not alone and that people support them and care about them. If your institution has a secular student club, or if there is a nontheistic community group in your area, encourage them to go and to meet sympathetic people there.

All in all, it is important that these students both realize the reality of the situation (that it may hurt and that it is ok) and also that they are not alone in this. By giving them the support they need and an open environment to voice their feelings, you can go a long way in helping them get through this concern.

Physical

The concern of physical violence is sometimes the most frightening. A student’s fear of physical bullying or attacks may not be unmerited, as it does happen from time to time. However, encouraging students to adopt safe behaviors will go a long way in allaying this fear. For instance, if students are afraid they may be the victim of a physical altercation, encourage them to travel in groups and in very visible areas. Help them learn how to avoid confrontation and how to avoid escalating the situation.

If a secular student has been threatened, encourage them to report it to the authorities (whether that be a leader, an ally, or the police if necessary). Remind the student that this is not cowardice but a reasonable protection and an attempt at avoiding physical violence altogether.

If you as an ally hear of a threat or a possible physical altercation, it is absolutely necessary that you report it immediately, as you would any other such situation.

Economic

Economic concerns are very real for secular students who rely on their parents, a scholarship, or their employment to go to school. The majority of students today do not go to school on their own funds but rely on some form of economic aid that allows them to cover living expenses and go to school at the same time. At the high school level, students are often legally dependent on their parents for housing and their basic needs, to say nothing of spending money and any luxuries. At the college or graduate level, students may receive financial assistance from their parents as well as from employers, the government, or scholarships.



Alleviating this concern can be difficult for many students who are dependent on others for economic support. It is our hope that students should be able to come out to their parents, employers, etc. and not face discrimination, but that isn't always the case.

Parents or legal guardians of a minor cannot legally throw their dependent out of the house or deny their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. If you encounter a student in such a situation, you should report it to the authorities, usually your state's department of child and family services. Unfortunately, once the student is no longer a minor, their parents may cut them off financially without any legal repercussions.

Nontheistic students have little more protection on the employment front. While being fired for being a nontheist is against the law, it is extremely hard to prove. To further complicate the situation, this protection is not extended to minors

The best we can do for students who are financially dependent on others for their schooling is to assure them that there is a community that supports them, even though it cannot do so monetarily. Encourage them that there's nothing wrong with waiting to come out to certain people if the student relies on them financially. In the meantime, encourage them to build supportive relationships with like-minded or accepting individuals.

You might also encourage the student to seek opportunities for economic growth and development with people who are not going to judge them for their beliefs. In this way, they can gain greater independence in both their economic life and in their personal lives as well. Ultimately, though, sometimes it is the ideal situation to stay "closeted" until financial independence can be gained - and that's okay!

Students Who May Self-Harm

Please note: You are not expected to be a therapist. Your primary duty is to get potentially self-harming students to a counselor. Appropriately reporting potentially self-harming students to a medical professional or the authorities is an expectation of the Secular Safe Zone program.

For students, fitting in with their peers is one of the most important things in their lives, if not the most important thing. This is very difficult for non-believers, who are often excluded from the in-group of religious believers. The result is higher suicide rates among secular teens.

Overall, 90% of individuals who commit suicide give clear warnings beforehand, and 80% tell someone they're going to do it. It is very possible you may encounter a student who has a strong potential to self-harm or even take their own life. *The goal should always be to get these students into counseling.*

However, sometimes a student is unwilling to enter counseling. If a student expresses feelings of self-harm and is not willing to enter counseling, it is absolutely necessary that the ally take all talk of self-harm seriously and report it to a medical professional and the authorities at once. In these situations, your job is not to convince these students to seek counseling, but to ensure their safety.

Dealing with Resistance

In the above section we covered how to support the secular students you'll be working with and how to create safe spaces. Unfortunately, just by supporting an unpopular minority you may open yourself up to criticism (and possibly harassment) from your peers, subordinates, colleagues, supervisors, and others. In this section we will go through some types of resistance that you might encounter and how you can handle them professionally and responsibly.

Criticism from Subordinates

A subordinate is someone who you have some sort of authority or power over in a supervisory capacity, or someone you are responsible for in a professional manner (their work, safety, conduct, etc.). For example, this might be an employee you supervise, a resident of a resident advisor's floor, a volunteer you manage, or even a student in a class. Criticism of this type can crop up in a variety of ways, including obstructing you, yelling, arguing, disrespectful laughter, or even a refusal to speak in any voice aside from body language.

Sadly, you will probably not change this person. It is important to avoid power struggles in your professional space with individuals upset over your worldview. If you are invited to a name-calling match, do not attend. This probably goes without saying, but responding to such criticism in kind actually erodes your power.

If resistance or hostility occurs in your professional space, try to avoid taking it personally. It is virtually certain that the feelings being expressed have nothing to do with you personally. Reminding your audience (as well as yourself) of this can help dilute any anger. For example, saying "I understand you're upset, but being angry with me is not going to solve the issue."

The good thing is that the majority of your audience, even if they disagree with you, does not want to see you disrupted or harassed. You will earn a greater esteem from your audience if you can handle the situation calmly, rationally, and respectfully. Hostility from a limited number of people does not mean you are alone or that you've lost control of your space.

There are several ways to manage disagreement effectively.

Ignore it.

Sometimes this really is the best approach. Bear in mind that this may open the door to similar situations in the future. You may want to acknowledge repeated attempts by using the "acknowledge and open discussion" option below.

Alternatively, you could inform the individual (and your audience/class if you have one) that there is not enough time to have this discussion during your time but that you will be available afterward for comments.

Acknowledge and deflect.

This would be something like "Thank you for your honesty in expressing that opinion."

Acknowledge and respond.

Start with a simple acknowledgement and offer a response: "Thank you for your honesty in expressing that opinion. Can you say more about what you mean?" Often, when offered a platform, the disagreeing party will decline and you can resume. If they do elect to elaborate, it opens the door for a learning opportunity. Remember though, this will take time away from you. Make sure it's a learning opportunity that can be pursued without a detriment to others or yourself.

You may also consider pinning them down on some common ground. Something like, "All we want is to create safe and inclusive spaces, and you're all about that, right?"

Acknowledge and open the discussion.

Upon noting the comment, ask others if they agree with it. Why or why not? Proceed to guide the discussion.



Co-opt the comment.

If an individual says nontheists are depressed, for instance, consider responding with, “Some nontheists are depressed, but by no means all of them. Some religious people are also depressed. Most nontheists have many things in life that make them happy, many of which are the same things that make religious people happy.” This is using the individual’s comment to both dispel a myth and to validate minority ideas and beliefs.

There may be comments designed to bait you. Look at such comments as an opportunity to provide information, dispel myths, and to validate minorities.

Your colleagues may have experience with situations like these. Ask how they resolve such things and learn from their experiences.

Criticism from Colleagues

Dealing with criticism subordinates is not the only type of criticism you can expect. Criticism from your colleagues can be just as disruptive to your professional space and time as it is to the students and others you work with. Whether it’s proselytizing or myths and discriminatory statements, this section will prepare you for some of the issues you may face.

Proselytizing

Unfortunately, as an ally to the secular student movement, many people will assume that your support marks you as a nontheist, no matter what your professed beliefs. There may be those that you work with that see this as an opportunity to try and “save” you or to convert you to their belief system.

How you handle proselytizing can depend a lot on your personal preferences. However, as a Secular Safe Zone ally there are some things that we would encourage you to do, regardless of your preferences. And of course, if you would rather not have the conversation to begin with, that is your choice.

Regardless of your personal religious beliefs (or lack thereof), an individual proselytizing to you can lead to a conversation. Rather than viewing it as an annoyance or a threat to your personal identity, use it as an opportunity to discuss the issues we’ve been discussing in this manual. Approach the person and listen to their opinions. Their comments may give you an opportunity to dispel myths, curb discrimination, and to educate them about secular students and other worldviews. This does not mean that, at the end, you and your colleague have to agree with each other. It is, however, an opportunity you can use to your advantage, and thereby also to the advantage of the students you support.

There will be some who proselytize to you who are prejudiced, misinformed, and not open to having an honest conversation. In this situation, we recommend that you politely refuse the discussion in a professional manner. You may want to refer them to an informational source that does not involve wasting your time (or their). See the Organizations section in this manual for more information on some good sources of information.

Myths

There may be times in conversation, meetings, small talk, or overheard conversation when you hear myths about secular students. How you handle these situations depends largely on the context, relationship to the speaker, and the openness with which you feel comfortable dispelling these myths.

We recommend that, as an ally, you feel prepared to dispel the myths we discussed in this manual (and perhaps others, if you are comfortable doing so). As we discussed above, silence implies a taboo. If we don’t stand up to these myths, we are failing to create a safe space. If a colleague approaches you with a myth or tries to persuade others to be prejudiced through these myths, it is important to speak up.

Rumors

It is possible that you will encounter any number of rumors about the secular community in general, the secular students you work with, or even yourself personally. Dealing with these rumors can be difficult, as rumors thrive in many of the social situations and communities humans need to survive. Despite this, it is important to deal with these issues in a responsible and professional manner.

Rumors can come in many shapes and sizes. You may hear people speculating about your religious beliefs, or making up bizarre stories about the supposed Satan-worshipping ways of the secular community. The subject of the rumor is not so much the problem as its effect. Rumors spread misinformation, create another in/out-group dynamic, and bully people into not questioning their beliefs.

When confronted with rumors, we recommend two tactics: education and persistence. Establishing a consistent and educational-based alternative to the rumor will both help to eradicate it and to settle the situation in terms of misinformation. Be persistent in doing so. We recommend confronting the rumor (and those spreading it) whenever it surfaces. With persistence and education, rumors typically either stop or are forgotten about.

Jokes

You may be the witness to some jokes, both about yourself and secular students. While humor is obviously very important, jokes at the expense of others can imply that minorities are less than human. It can also validate prejudiced language and beliefs.

Standing up to these types of criticism can be tough, as people tend to see those who do as overly concerned about political correctness or just humorless. As with rumors, only persistence and education are appropriate here, along with reassurances that you are actually a normal human being who enjoys humor just not at the expense of minorities.

A tactic that we have found particularly useful is to switch the topic of the joke to a (more or less) universally accepted diversity issue, such as civil rights. For example, reframing it by saying “Would you make the same joke about [insert racial minority]?” Putting it in this context can help people to see how prejudiced a supposedly harmless joke can be.

Dealing with Public Pressure

You might encounter resistance from parents and the public in general. Many in the public sphere see the promotion and acceptance of secular students as an implied attack on religion or the religious. Nothing could be further from the truth. The acceptance and empowerment of a minority does not imply the exclusion of the majority and in fact protecting one group’s religious freedom helps protect it for all.

Many parents/guardians of secular students have concerns about their children’s safety. This is understandable. The section on anxiety and concerns should prepare you to discuss this with parents/guardians and hopefully allay any fears that they may have.

Some parents/guardians have other concerns, often if they and/or their children are not secular. They may be upset that you, as an educator or role model, are not teaching what they feel their children ought to be taught about religion. This may extend to concerns about the morality of what you’re teaching their children, since many people associate atheism with immorality (a myth we discussed above). We recommend approaching these parents/guardians and explaining the situation in terms of diversity. Start by reminding them that, at this age it is extremely important that students have the freedom to experiment with and test their roles in society. Beyond that, it is important to respect the diversity of human life. After all, their child’s questioning does not change who they are. Dispelling myths about secular students in this conversation may help to dispel the concern.



You may also receive resistance from the parents/guardians of non-secular students. This could be anything from angry letters, to push back from your PTA or school board. Handling these situations may be as easy as the situations above. Speaking with them about the issue, dispelling myths and rumors, and trying to come to an understanding can go a long way (even if everyone doesn't agree). However, you may want to inform your supervisor or administrators about the situation if it begins to escalate.

There are going to be some people that you cannot convince. It is not your job to convince everyone in your community that you are right. The best thing that you can do in this situation is to support the students and make sure they have a safe and supportive space to air their concerns and talk about their ideas.

Criticism from Supervisors and Administrators

You may also experience criticism from those above you, as well. Remember: it is illegal to discriminate against you for speech or your worldview. If you experience discrimination from supervisors or administrators, we encourage you to use the system your employer has in place to file complaints and grievances. If you do not wish to do this, having a polite and professional conversation with the individual about how you find their comments inappropriate may work as well. If you have any questions or require support on an issue, please contact us.

Questions about the Secular Safe Zone

In this manual you've learned not only what the perspective of a secular student is, but also how to assist them and make safe spaces for them to truly become better people. In this section, we address some of the questions you might have about the Secular Safe Zone. If you have a question or concern that you don't see here, please contact us at info@secularsafezone.org.

Now that I've completed training, do I get to register as a Secular Safe Zone ally?

Yes! If you go to our website at www.secularsafezone.org and click on the "Become an Ally" button in the left panel, it will allow you to register as an official ally.

How do I get materials to denote my professional space as a Safe Zone?

You can either contact us at info@secularsafezone.org or visit our website at www.secularsafezone.org to order materials. Signage which you can print yourself is also available free of charge under the "Downloads" section of the Secular Safe Zone website.

Do you hold in-person training sessions?

Yes we do! Please check our website at www.secularsafezone.org to see upcoming events and in-person training sessions.

Can I host a Secular Safe Zone training at my school/institution?

Absolutely! We would love to help you set up a training. Contact us at info@secularsafezone.org to get more information!

Can I become a Secular Safe Zone facilitator and train others to be allies?

Currently, we do not have a program to train Secular Safe Zone facilitators, although it is something we are interested in developing soon. If you are interested in being kept up-to-date about this potential program, please contact us at info@secularsafezone.org.

I have a really cool idea to improve this program. Who do I talk to?

We would love to hear your idea! Please email us at info@secularsafezone.org and let us know what you think!



What do I do if my job (or position) is threatened because I am participating in the SSZ program? Can my employers prevent me from participating?

The specific laws and regulations differ between public and private schools, high schools, and colleges, and from state to state. Please contact the SSZ manager at the Secular Student Alliance for more specific advice and assistance. We have the training and experience to help you recognize and respond to an illegal situation.

Who produces the Secular Safe Zone program?

The Secular Safe Zone is a program of the Secular Student Alliance, an educational 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. You can learn more about the Secular Student Alliance at www.secularstudents.org.

I want to support the Secular Safe Zone financially. How do I do that?

The Secular Safe Zone is a program of the Secular Student Alliance. To make a donation to support the Secular Safe Zone program and other Secular Student Alliance programs, simply visit our website at www.secularsafezone.org and go to the "Donate" page.

I want to start a Secular Student Alliance affiliate group at my school. How do I do that?

Starting a Secular Student Alliance affiliate is a great way to ensure a safe space for secular students. If you're interested in assisting students in starting an affiliate group, please visit <http://www.secularstudents.org/groupstartingpacket> to learn more and request a group starting packet.

Organizations

There are a number of organizations that can serve as resources for you as a Secular Safe Zone ally or as a resource to the students you help. This first section explores organizations based around a secular worldview or who offer specific services to secular students.

American Humanist Association (AHA)

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

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/>

Camp Quest

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

<http://www.camp-quest.org/>

Center for Inquiry (CFI)

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

<http://www.centerforinquiry.net/>

Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF)

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

<http://www.ffrf.org/>



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)

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

<http://www.thefire.org/>

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)

The Interfaith Youth Core is an organization working to bring young people of all worldviews together to strengthen social cohesion, build social capital, and address social problems. While the Secular Student Alliance encourages its affiliates to participate in interfaith work, we always stress how important it is for our affiliates to retain their identity as non-theists and be openly skeptical of and critically approach supernatural claims.

<http://www.ifyc.org/>

Society for Humanistic Judaism

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

<http://www.shj.org/>

James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF)

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

<http://www.randi.org/>

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State

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

<http://www.au.org/>

Support Organizations

As a trusted ally of secular students, those students may come to you with concerns that you have no expertise with, but they may feel uncomfortable reporting them or they may not give you enough information to report them. In these types of situations, rather than forcing the student to report something when they feel uncomfortable, please direct them to these secular resources. These resources do not, in any way, remove your obligation to report issues that you are required to report to your institution. Please follow all laws and school regulations.

The reason for this list is that certain organizations have religious motivations when helping people and may try to proselytize while offering help. That can make situations worse for secular students. These organizations have no religious affiliation and students can contact them without fear of being ostracized or refused help due to their lack of religious beliefs.

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)

RAINN is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline in partnership with more than 1,100 local rape crisis centers across the country and operates the DoD Safe Helpline for the Department of Defense.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1.800.656.HOPE (4673)

<http://rainn.org/>

Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood is the largest U.S. provider of reproductive health services, including cancer screening, HIV and STI screening and counseling, contraception, and abortion. Services are provided to women and men, regardless of income or economic status.

1.800.230.PLAN (1.800.230.7526)

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Since its inception, the Lifeline has engaged in a variety of initiatives to improve crisis services and advance suicide prevention.

1.800.273.TALK (8255)

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>



The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

1.866.488.7386

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

The Center to Prevent Youth Violence

Founded in 1998, The Center to Prevent Youth Violence (CPYV), previously known as PAX, is an innovative and uniquely effective organization working to end the crisis of youth violence in America.

1.866.SPEAK-UP (773.2587)

<http://www.cpyv.org/>

National Runaway Switchboard

The mission of the National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) is to help keep America's runaway, homeless and at-risk youth safe and off the streets.

1.800.RUNAWAY (786.2929)

<http://www.1800runaway.org/>



www.secularsafezone.org

A Program of the Secular Student Alliance



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