**Manifestations of Intolerance and Discrimination Against Non-believers**

**1.1 Definitions and Conceptual Approach**

In the United States, the oppression of racial, class, gender, and sexual orientation classifications has garnered significant attention. We use the term *oppression* to refer to social structures, policies, and practices that maintain systematic domination and subordination.[[1]](#footnote-0) Recently, an increasing amount of attention has focused on r*eligious oppression*. Religious oppression results from a historical legacy of *Christian hegemony*, or the persistence of normative Christianity. Christian hegemony results in *Christian privilege*, best understood as the unearned social and cultural advantages bestowed upon individuals by virtue of their religious status. Participating in civic life without worry about discrimination, persecution, and intolerance is the greatest privilege Christians in the U.S. are granted.

Although empirical research indicates that religious tolerance is increasing for minority religions, this acceptance does not extend to non-theistic persons, as demonstrated by an abundance of news media and by a growing body of academic research. The risk for confronting *prejudice* (i.e., negative attitudes/beliefs) and experiencing *discrimination* (i.e., behavioral manifestations of prejudice) is greatest in contexts where minority status is salient and prejudice is not actively discouraged.[[2]](#footnote-1) In other words, non-believers who openly self-identify (i.e., are “out” of the religious closet) are especially vulnerable to religious oppression, which is why many conceal their nontheist identities. Although there are a wide range of nuanced nonreligious identities, the terms “nonreligious,” “nonbeliever,” “nontheist,” and “religiously unaffiliated” are used interchangeably in this document. Similarly, *anti-atheist discrimination* is used here to discuss discrimination that all non-believers, not just atheists, are vulnerable to.

**1.2 Religion and Nonreligion in Higher Education**

Claiming no religious affiliation is trend that has been steadily rising. In 2012, the largest group of religiously unaffiliated individuals (30%) were people age 18-30.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Demographic Profile

* 32% of 18-to-24 year olds and 29% of 25-to-34 year olds are religiously unaffiliated.[[4]](#footnote-3)
* In 2013, 24.6% of incoming freshmen reported no religious affiliation.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Worldview Classification[[6]](#footnote-5)

Findings from the 2013 ARIS data classifies college students into three worldview groups - Religious (31.8%), Spiritual (32.4%), and Secular (28.2%).

* The Religious group is overwhelmingly Christian (70%) with an even gender distribution.
* More women than men identify as “spiritual.” One-third of the Spiritual group are “Nones.”
* The Secular group attracted more men. When specifically questioned about belief in God, 41.7% of the group said god does not exist, while the statement regarding the inability to prove either way resonated with 35.2% of group. Correlating worldview to theological belief suggests that 76.9% of Secular students are either atheist or agnostic.

Religious/Secular Polarization[[7]](#footnote-6)

Conflict between Religious and Secular students existed on all measures of science and philosophical issues, political orientation, and public policy.

* Religious students were more likely to endorse metaphysical ideas and supernatural explanations over reason/science, oppose policies that were unsupported by doctrine, favor policies that advantaged Christians, and politically identify as “conservative”.
* Secular students were more likely to endorse explanations driven by reason and science, support policies that gave people personal autonomy, be harsher critics of religion, and politically identify as liberal.

An increase of religious “nones” undoubtedly results in widening the divide between religious and nonreligious students. It is important for faculty and school administrators to be cognizant of contentious issues between religious and nonreligious students in order to effectively create a campus climate in which all students’ positions are heard.

**1.3 Discrimination against Nonreligious Students**

Intolerance and discrimination can manifest through a broad ranges of acts on and off campus and can be committed by students, faculty, and/or administrative staff.

Individual Discrimination Experienced by Nonreligious Students[[8]](#footnote-7)

* Social Ostracism
* Coercion
* Verbal Harassment/Stereotyping/Slander
* Being Exposed/Outed
* Proselytization
* Vandalization of secular advertising materials[[9]](#footnote-8)

Nonreligious students report experiencing institutional discrimination, which despite being largely unintentional, keeps them part of an invisible stigmatized minority.[[10]](#footnote-9) One of the most salient issues nonreligious students report is the lack of space for support and spiritual expression available to them on campus. Other institutional barriers the hinder secular inclusion are disproportionate ratios of religious/non-religious student organizations and class programming, the lack of opportunities for engaging in religious conversations/debate with faculty and other students, and the exclusion of secular perspectives in campus-sponsored forums, presentations, and guest speakers.[[11]](#footnote-10)

The prevalence of misinformation is a noted challenge to interfaith literacy.[[12]](#footnote-11)*Atheophobia,* or the fear and extreme dislike of atheists that permeates American culture, is typically driven by false stereotypes and misconceptions.[[13]](#footnote-12) However, not only are nonreligious students challenged by misinformation, they are also challenged by *no* information. For example, the belief that America was founded as a Christian nation is widely held by many students as fact. Educators can easily undo the conflation of Protestantism and American nationalism through conversations about the deistic beliefs of the Founding Fathers or the history of American Freethought and the Ethical Care Movement circa late 19th century. Challenging underlying assumptions about secular morality or the validity of moral campaigns targeting atheists (e.g., 1950s McCarthyism), can be an effective way to eliminate misinformation and dispel myths.

**1.4 The Impact of Intolerance**

Perceived stigma and anti-atheist discrimination can have a negative impact on the educational and social outcomes of nonreligious students. Studies show that people engage in stigma management, independent of actually experiencing marginalization. Just perceiving stigma is enough to make non-believers try to conceal their identities or simply withdrawal from their social environment, both of which can generate psychological distress.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Scholarly studies on religion, spirituality, and campus climates have reported consistent empirical findings. Overall, nonreligious students:

* Manage stigma by concealing their non-theist identities.[[15]](#footnote-14)
* Remaining silent in classrooms and other social settings to avoid offending religious classmates.[[16]](#footnote-15)
* Report higher rates of negative peer interaction, group conflict, and feelings of coercion compared to religious majority students.[[17]](#footnote-16)
* Exhibit lower levels of well-being compared to religious majority students.[[18]](#footnote-17)
* Report the lowest rates of college satisfaction.[[19]](#footnote-18)

Anti-atheist prejudice is the least understood and least talked about form of prejudice. The greatest challenge for nonreligious students is overcoming stigma and misinformation.[[20]](#footnote-19) Nonreligious students are aware of their minority status. Those who self-identify as an atheist or agnostic are extremely vulnerable to experiencing discrimination on campus, which is why many conceal their nontheist identities.[[21]](#footnote-20) By remaining silent perpetuate their marginalized status by remaining an invisible stigmatized population.

**1.5 Religious Tolerance is not Christian Persecution**

The opening of a new residence hall at an Alabama University sparked debate at the latter end of 2013, “unofficially” providing Christian students with “faith-based” housing. In the words of one religious student, “We have to be tolerant of so many things, but nobody has to be tolerant of religion.”[[22]](#footnote-21) Attempts to broaden inclusion of religious minorities are often interpreted as Christian oppression by religious students. Institutions that are supportive of secular worldviews or have a history of religious and spiritual inclusion have been perceived as hostile and negatively experienced by religious majority students, whereas nonreligious students visiting the same universities at the same time reported positive perceptions and experiences.[[23]](#footnote-22)

**Customization for Institution-Specific Needs**

How you customize your proposal/discussion/presentation will depend on your institution type and the availability of institution-specific information that you have access too. Regardless of how much or how little information you can find (and remember, you can generate your own data to better understand your particular needs), you will want to show how the SSZ program is relevant to your campus. We strongly suggest adding two components to this “Needs” packet: 1 - Background information depending on institution type and 2 - Information about the current campus climate.

**2.1 Institution History & Background**

You may choose to provide a brief historical overview of how religion relates to your institution type. Historically marginalized populations, such as women, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBT persons often experience multiple layers of oppression, which increases the risk of openly identifying as a non-believer. For example, understanding both the historical importance of black churches during the civil rights movement and the contemporary importance of Christian fellowship for persons of color can help you better equip SSZ Allies in addressing the needs of African American nontheists.[[24]](#footnote-23) By recognizing the *cultural* importance of religion for certain groups, you will be able to better tailor the program for your institution’s specific needs.

We’ve provided information and additional resources for different types of institutions:

Minority Serving Institutions (MSI):

Seven categorizations of institutions fit under the umbrella of MSI status: (1) Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU); (2) Black-serving, non-HBCU; (3) Hispanic-serving; (4) Asian-serving; (5) American Indian-service (Tribal Colleges and Universities - TCU); (6) Other Minority-serving; (7) Non-minority-serving. *For more information on MSI guidelines and characteristics, click on the following link:* <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008156.pdf>

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

“The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: ‘...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.’ Federal regulations (20 USC 1061 (2)) allow for certain exceptions to the founding date” (IPEDS, 2011).

*For information on HBCU, click on the links below:*

Commentary - The Black Church: <http://diverseeducation.com/article/17266/>

Church Roots Run Deep Among HBCU: <http://diverseeducation.com/article/17259/>

Tribal Colleges and Universities

An institutional classification developed by the Andrew W. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Tribal Colleges and Universities, with few exceptions, are tribally controlled and located on reservations. Colleges and universities that are members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium" (IPEDS, 2011).

Hispanic-serving Institutions

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities: <http://www.hacu.net/hacu/default.asp>

Women’s Colleges

The origins of women’s colleges are rooted in religious ideology. For more information about this history: <http://edci815s12.wikispaces.com/file/view/Beecher_Lyon_WomenCurric.pdf>

Women’s College Coalition: <http://www.womenscolleges.org>

Faith-Based Institutions

“Good Practices” for Student Affairs Professionals at Catholic Universities:

<http://www.sau.edu/Documents/Areas/Student-Services/studentservices-PrinciplesofGoodPractice.pdf>

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities: <http://www.cccu.org>

High Schools

Fantastic PDF Resource from the Anti-Defamation League - Religion in the Public Schools:

<http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/civil-rights/religiousfreedom/rips/ReligPubSchs-PDF.pdf>

Religion in U.S. Public Education: <http://theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2012/9/15/religion-in-us-public-education.html>

**2.2 Institution-Specific Need**

To assess the needs of your institution, you’ll need to do some research. The following are some suggestions on where to find basic information.

Institution Survey

Search your institution’s website for your institution’s Campus Climate Survey report. You might also look to see if your institution participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey (CRSCS). If you have access to these or similar reports, look for measures of religion/spirituality and/or religious discrimination. Identify any recommendations that might apply to the program. Be sure to note any absence of information regarding nonreligious students.

For more information about the NSSE, visit: <http://nsse.iub.edu>

For more information about the CRSCS, visit: <http://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/u4/Assessment%20Engagements_FINAL.pdf>

Student Organizations & Class Programming

Assess the number of religious student groups and student groups designated to support secular students (It’s usually approximately 50:1). If your campus has an SSA affiliate group, talk to the leadership about their experiences in working with the administration. Additionally, you can assess class offerings. Look at how many classes are offered on religion vs. secular worldviews.

**Why Implement a Secular Safe Zone Program?**

Empirical evidence has indicated that anti-atheist prejudice can be reduced by increasing the prevalence of secular perspectives.[[25]](#footnote-24) Through the Secular Safe Zone program, we seek to increase secular visibility by raising awareness of anti-atheist discrimination, dispel myth by creating supportive Allies for our secular students, and use education as a means to correct misinformation. Empirical and anecdotal evidence has illustrated that:

* While rate of religious commitment are increased for Protestant students attending college, rates of religious skepticism are increased for religious “others”/nonreligious students.[[26]](#footnote-25)
* Compared to students who hold sort some of religious belief, nonreligious students have the most pronounced decreases in subjective well-being, reporting dissatisfaction with friendships and feeling prepared for life post-college.[[27]](#footnote-26)
* Although some nonreligious students may not be a direct target for discrimination, decisions surrounding disclosure remains a source of frustration and strain.[[28]](#footnote-27)
* There are multiple sources of discrimination and prejudice - students, professors, and administrators.[[29]](#footnote-28)
* Both remaining silent and the lack of institutional support contribute to keeping nontheist students part of an invisible and stigmatized minority.[[30]](#footnote-29)
* Disengagement in the classroom and/or from peer interaction has less to do with disengagement from religion and more to do with the lack of secular support structures and/or is a form of stigma management.[[31]](#footnote-30)
* Nonreligious students are remarkably similar to students of faith. They desire community and develop friendships with like-minded individuals.[[32]](#footnote-31)
* Nonreligious students university experience is enhance on campuses that provide space for spiritual, or in this case, non-spiritual expression and/or are religiously and spiritually inclusive.[[33]](#footnote-32)
* Levels of student engagement are increased on campuses with SSA affiliate/other secular groups.provide students with opportunities to build community, engage in educational pursuits, get involved with activism, and partner with other student groups on service projects.[[34]](#footnote-33)

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**Additional Resources**

**Providing Services to Non-religious/Religious-questioning Students**

Inside Higher Ed: Atheists, on a Religious Campus

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/03/19/atheist-secular-students-becoming-established-religious-campuses>

Berkley Center: A Non-Religious Georgetown Experience

<http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/blogs/interfaith-service-at-georgetown-blog/posts/a-non-religious-georgetown-experience>

On Faith: Millennials are Faithful, but not Always Religious

<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2013/07/15/millennials-are-faithful-but-not-always-religious/11619>

The Harvard Crimson: Atheists Discuss Stigma Surrounding Lack of Faith

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/2/19/atheists_discuss_social_stigma/>

**Prevalence of Religion on Campus**

The Guardian: Teaching Religion: My Students are Trying to Run my Course

<http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/feb/08/academics-anonymous-teaching-religion-student-experience>

NY Times: The Religious Dorm at the Public University

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/education/the-christian-dorm-at-the-public-university.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>

Business Week: Chinese Atheist Lured to Find Jesus at U.S. Public School

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-12-21/chinese-atheists-lured-to-find-jesus-at-u-s-christian-schools.html>

**Discrimination Against Non-religious Students**

Huffington Post: Why I Don’t Want to be a West Point Grad

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/blake-page/west-point-religious-freedom_b_2232279.html>

ABC News: Northwest Christian University Class President Reveals He’s an Atheist

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/northwest-christian-university-class-president-reveals-atheist/story?id=20845696>

The Examiner: Atheist Student Faces Harassment After Ten Commandments Complaint

<http://www.examiner.com/article/atheist-student-faces-harassment-after-ten-commandments-complaint>

Alternet: Why is an Atheist High School Student Getting Vicious Death Threats?

<http://www.alternet.org/story/153803/why_is_an_atheist_high_school_student_getting_vicious_death_threats>

The Beacon: The Invisible Minority: Atheism UP

<http://upbeacon.com/2014/02/26/the-invisible-minority-atheism-at-up/>

Freethought Today: Deep in the Bible Belt - One Atheist Professor’s Experiences

<http://ffrf.org/legacy/fttoday/1995/december95/zellner.html>

**Interfaith Dialogue**

<http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201301/interreligious-ed-muslims-catholic-colleges-and-universities-26737>

Shepard Symposium on Social Justice: Reality and Myth in Non-Religious Narratives

<http://shepardsymposium.org/index.php/presenations/88-atheists-in-academia-reality-and-myth-in-non-religious-narratives>

1. Adams 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Harper 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Lugo 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Hout, Fisher, and Chaves 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Higher Education Research Institute. 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Kosmin and Keysar 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Kosmin and Keysar 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Fairchild 2009; Goodman and Mueller 2009; Harper 2007; Nash 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Liddell and Stedman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Goodman and Mueller. 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Mueller 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Patel and Meyer 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Nash 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Garneau 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Goodman and Mueller 2009; Mueller 2012; Nash 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Mueller 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. http://www.ifyc.org/CRSCS [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Bowman and Small 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Bowman and Toms Smedley 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Liddell and Stedman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Cragun et al. 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Steverson 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Rockenbach and Mayhew 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. See Stewart and Lozano 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Bowmen and Small 2012; Small and Bowmen 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Bowmen, Felix, and Ortiz 2014; Bowmen and Small 2012; Bowmen and Toms Smedley 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Mueller 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. see Goodman and Mueller 2009; Nash 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Goodman and Mueller 2009; Mueller 2012; Nash 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Liddell and Stedman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. Rockenbach and Mayhew 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. Liddell and Stedman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)