

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation (lead: Stacie Cherner) and Schusterman Family Philanthropies (lead: Rella Kaplowitz).

The study was designed by Eitan Hersh. Dr. Hersh developed the research, managed the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the report.

Dahlia Lyss served as research assistant and participated in all stages of the study's development. Laura Royden served as a research assistant focused on the analysis of focus groups.

The survey was implemented by College Pulse, a survey research and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of today's college students. Mary Wall (Panel Manager) served as the project manager from College Pulse.

College Pulse worked with Debra Mashek to conduct focus groups. In consultation with College Pulse and with Dr. Hersh, Dr. Mashek designed the focus group script and led the focus group sessions.

This report is a product of Hersh Research and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Jim Joseph Foundation or Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Suggested Citation: Eitan Hersh, "Jewish College Students in America," A Report to the Jim Joseph Foundation and Schusterman Family Philanthropies, 2022.

Executive Summary

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

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

Here are eleven takeaways from the report:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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