

Interest In and Closeness To Jewish Life On Campus

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

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

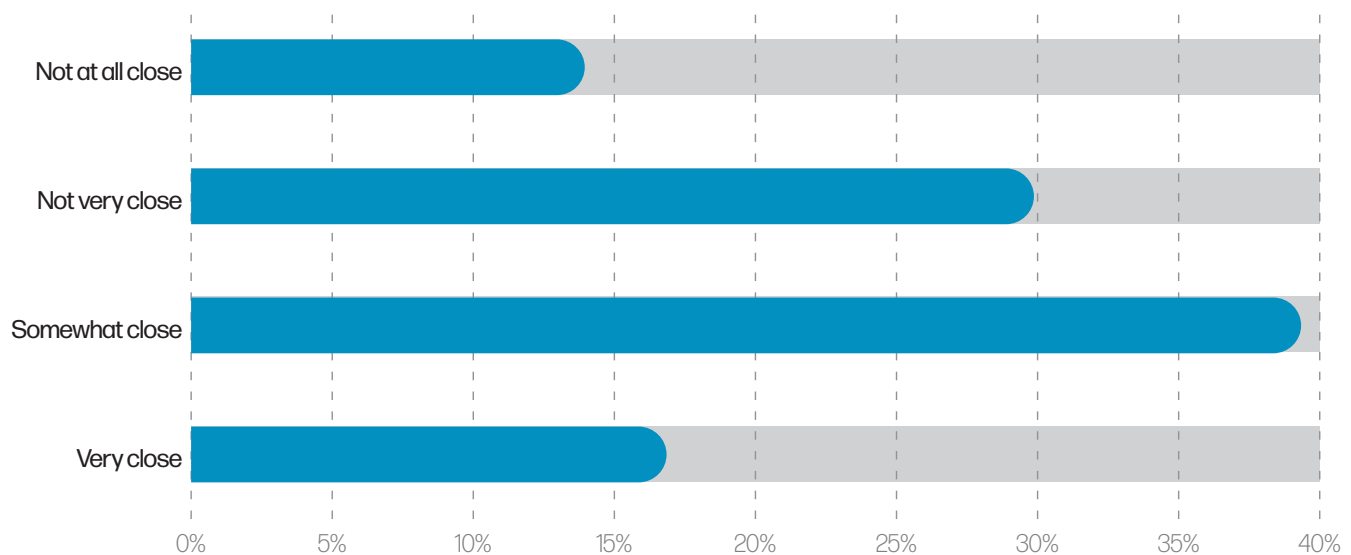
Over half of the Jewish sample said somewhat or very close. Not surprisingly, the responses were highly predicted by *Background* and *Affect*. Among those with low scores on *Background*, about 30% feel somewhat or very close. Among those with high scores, it’s closer to 75%.

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

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

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

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



N=1,721 (Jewish sample)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

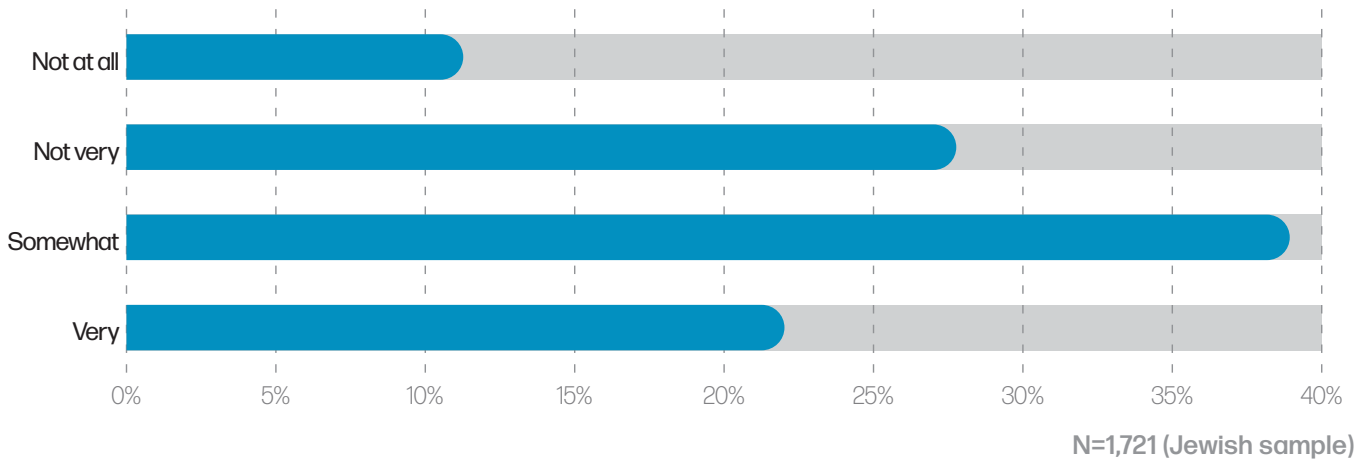
“ I live in a very Jewish community, I go to a school with a large Jewish population, so in that way I feel very connected.”

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
FEMALE

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

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

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



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

OHIO STATE
MALE

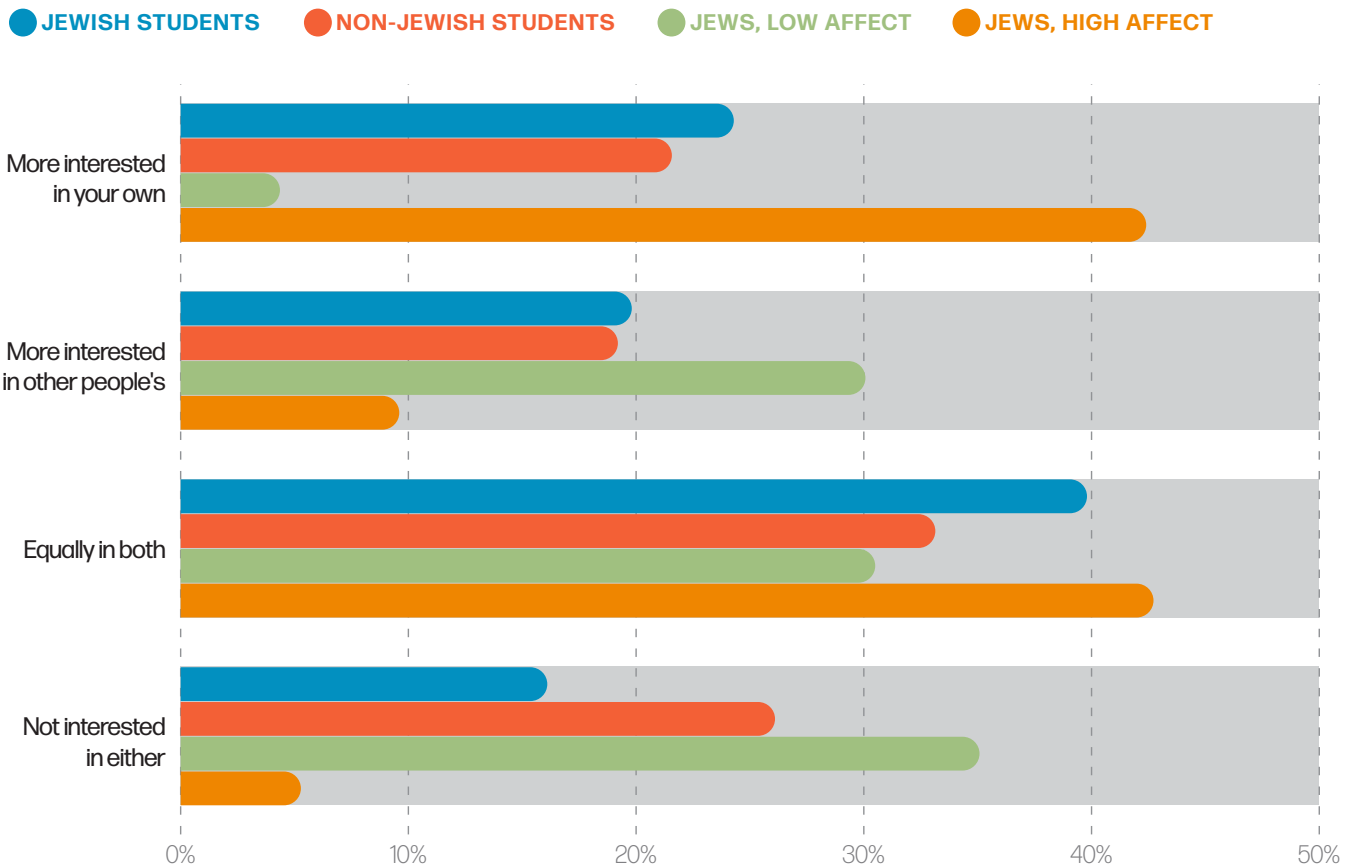
Orthodox Jewish students tend to be Republican, and more religious students might find it more important to explore Jewish aspects of their identity in college.²⁴ However, the partisan difference is significant even among non-Orthodox students.

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

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

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

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



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

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

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

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

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

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
FEMALE

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

SUNY BINGHAMTOM
MALE