

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

# Jewish Background and Affect

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

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

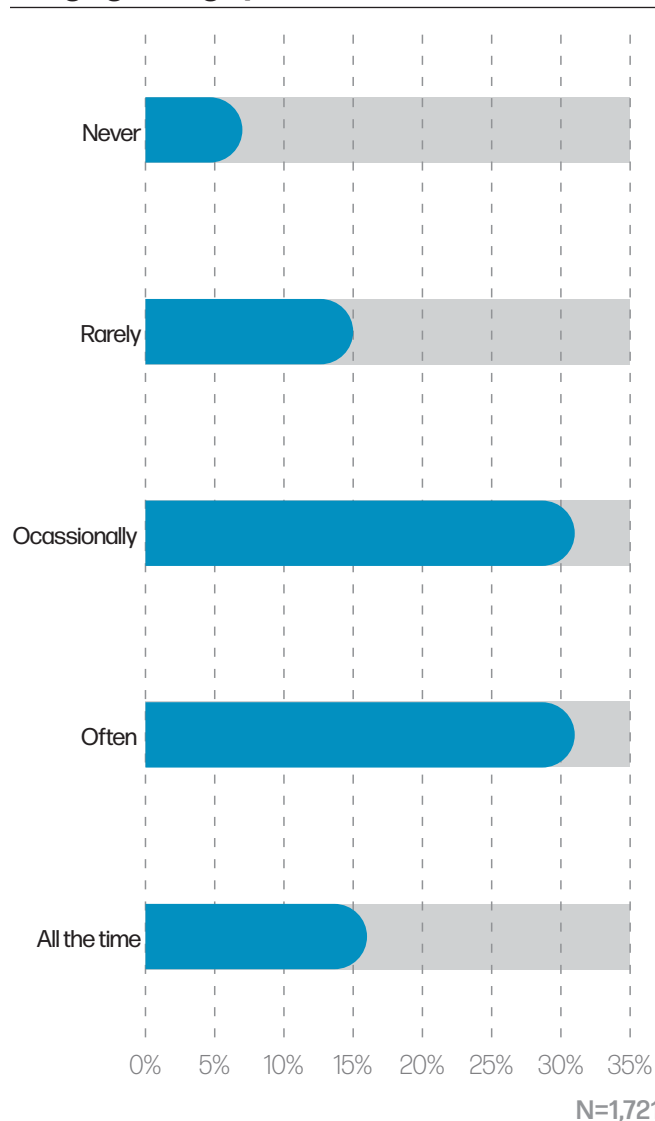
Of course, the varieties of Jewish experience and the nuances of Jewish identity are much more complex

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

## A. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND JEWISH IDENTITY

### BACKGROUND 1

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

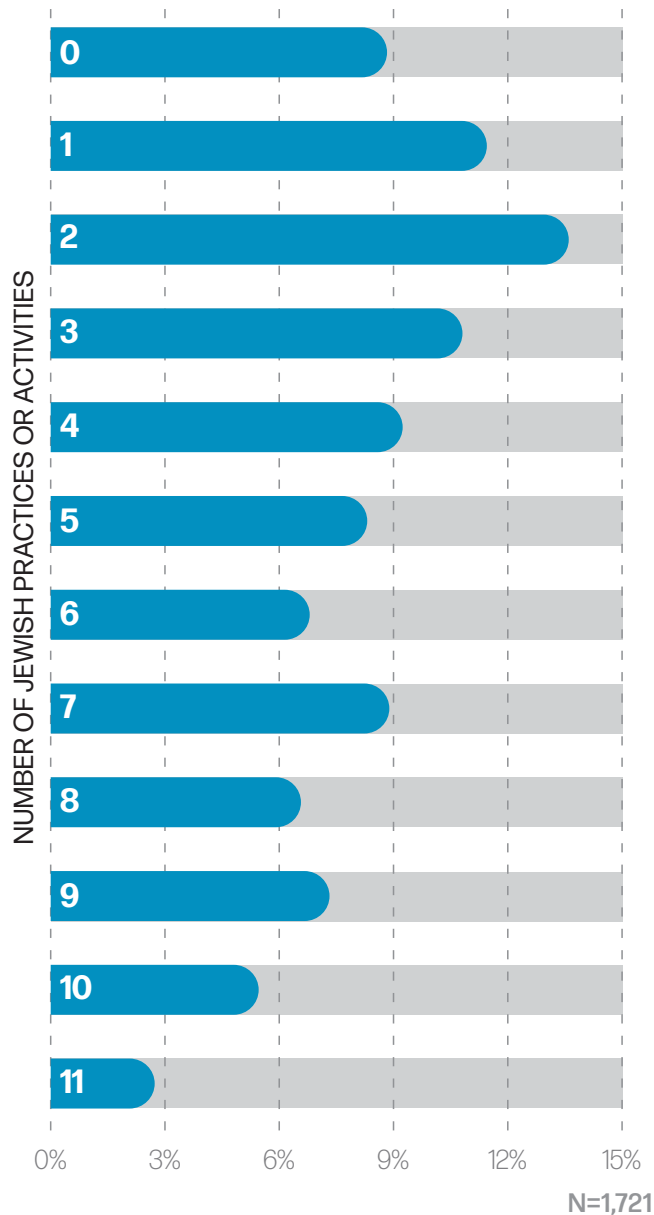


The first question asks students for a general summary of how much they did “Jewish things” growing up. Forty-seven percent of respondents said they did Jewish things growing up often or all the time. A similar percentage (46%) say they did Jewish things rarely or occasionally. And 7% said they never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

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

BACKGROUND 2

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



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

UC SANTA CRUZ  
FEMALE

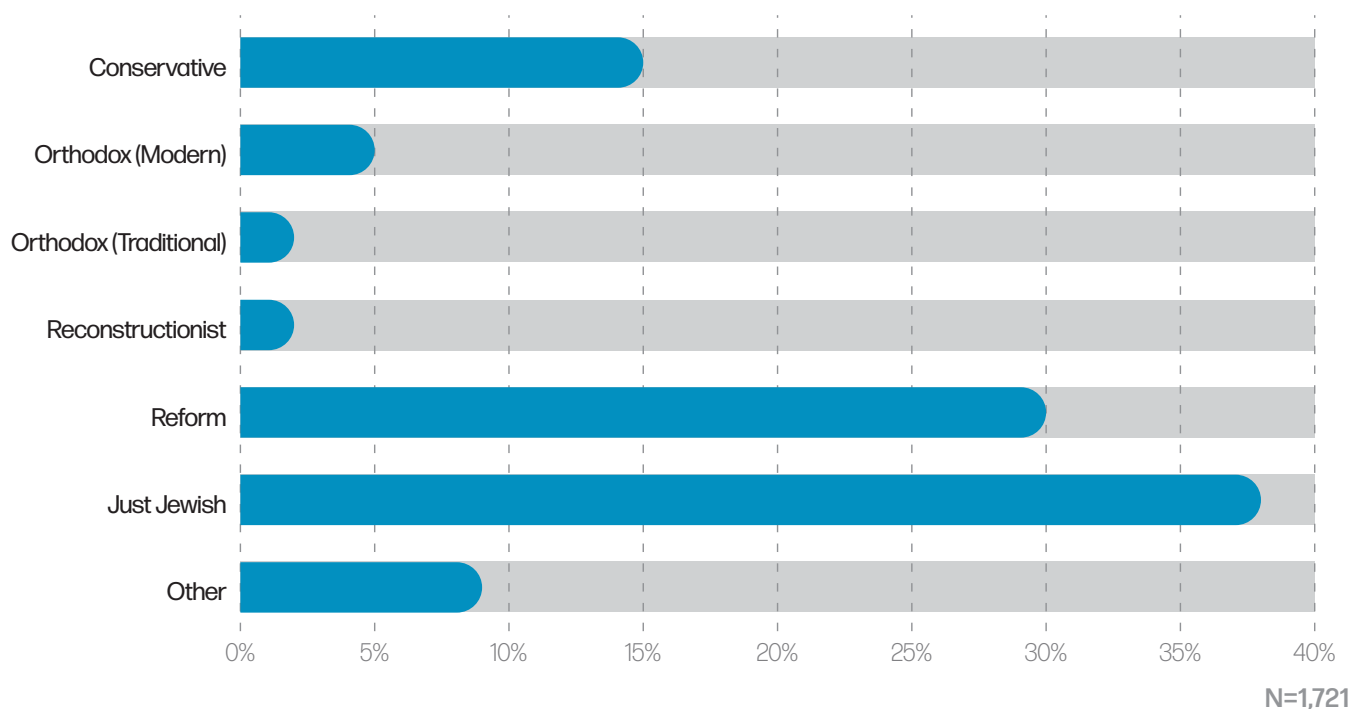
**“Where I grew up, there were really no other Jewish kids around and I’ve never been to a Bar Mitzvah or anything.”**

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
FEMALE

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

### BACKGROUND 3

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



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

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

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
FEMALE

## BACKGROUND 4

### **Are any of the people who raised you Jewish?**

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

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

SUNY BINGHAMTON FEMALE  
FEMALE

## BACKGROUND 5

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

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

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

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

## B. AFFECT TOWARD JEWISHNESS AND JEWISH IDENTITY

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

### AFFECT 1

#### Count of Jewish identities

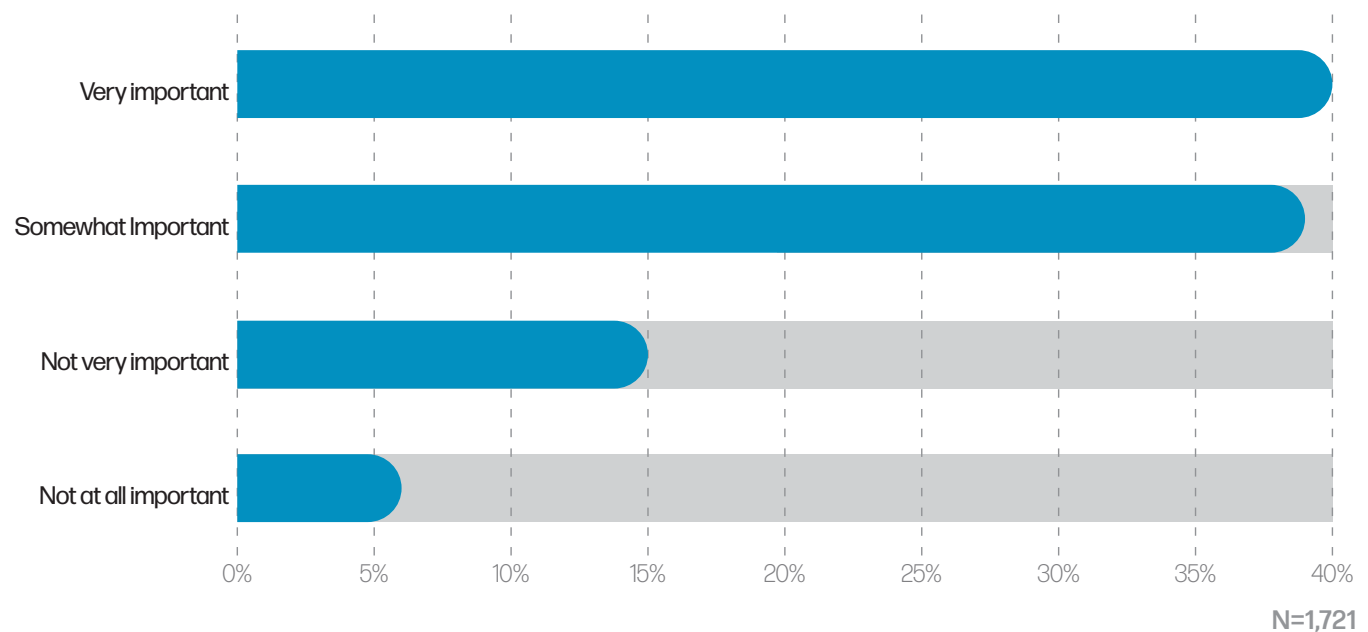
Recall that respondents were asked if they identified as Jewish in any of the following ways: ethnically, culturally, spiritually, and religiously. The first measure of *Affect* simply counts how many of these four categories applied to each respondent. About half (46%) of the Jewish sample selected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

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

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

### AFFECT 2

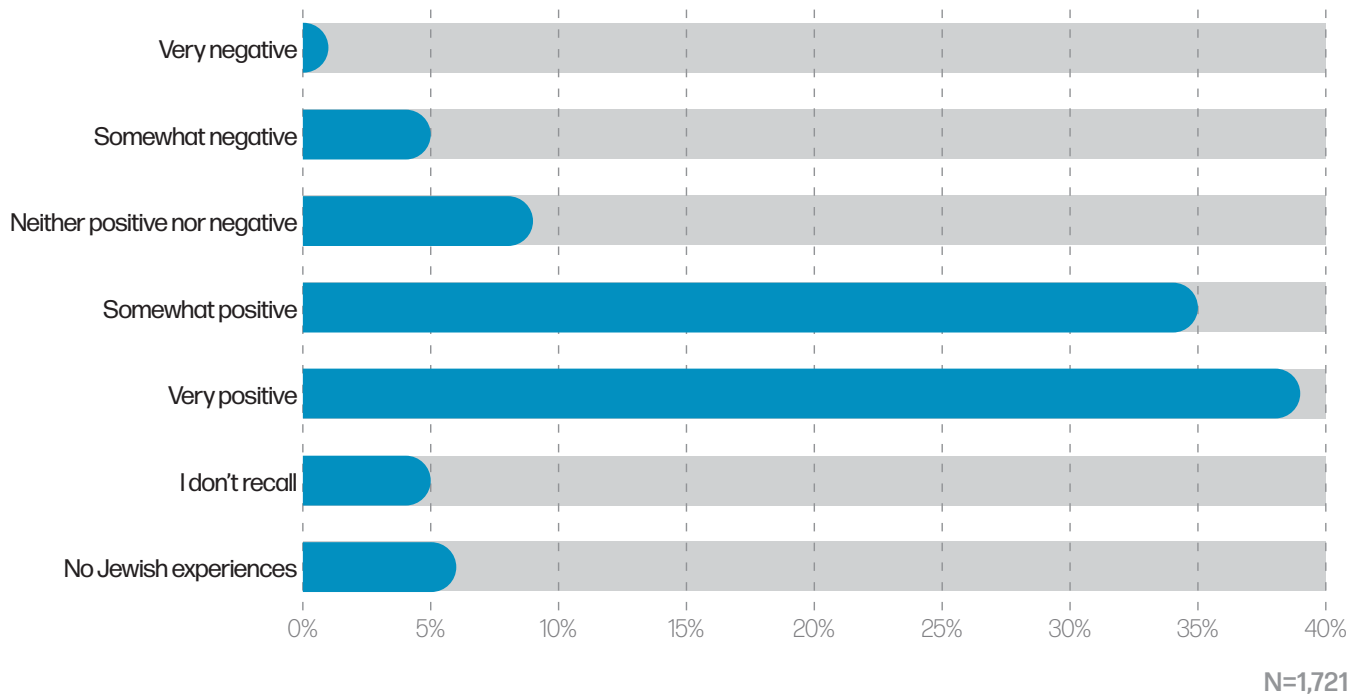
#### How important to you is your Jewish identity?



### AFFECT 3

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

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



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

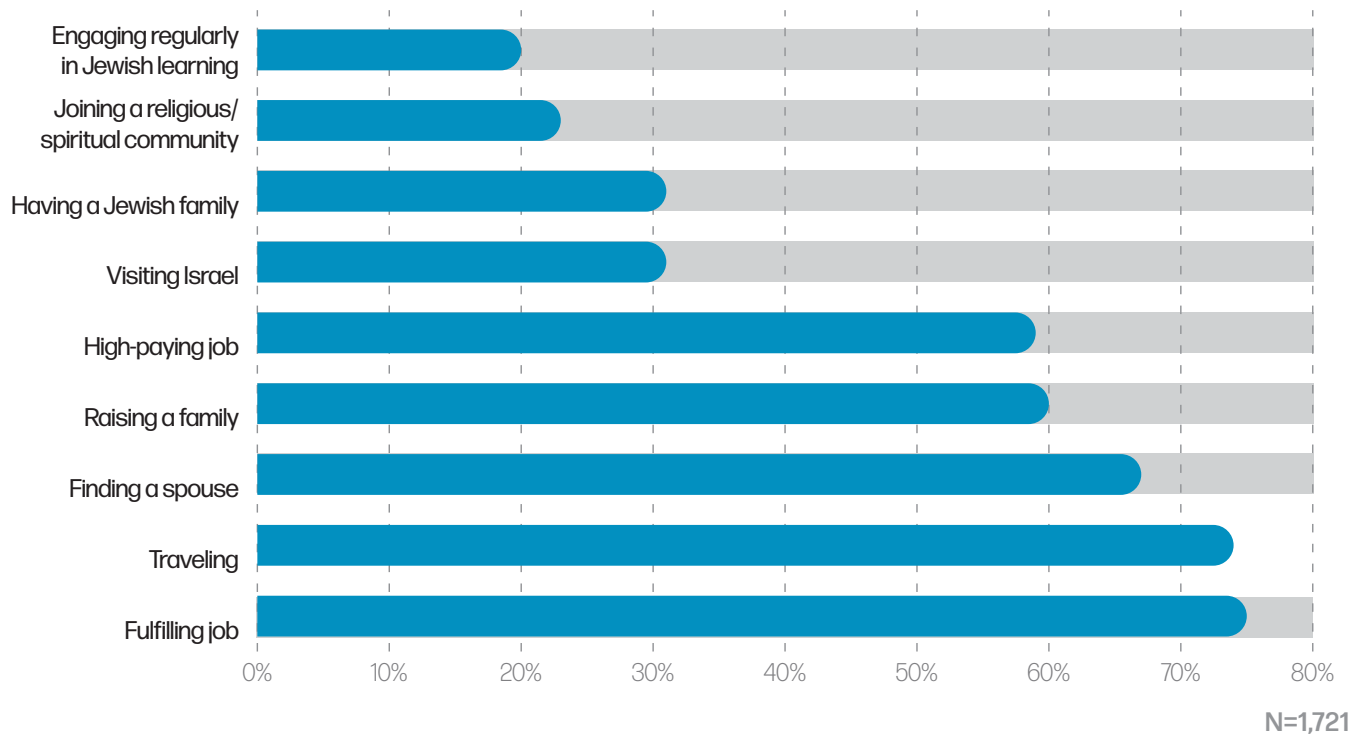
OHIO STATE  
MALE

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

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
FEMALE

AFFECT 4

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



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

TULANE UNIVERSITY  
FEMALE

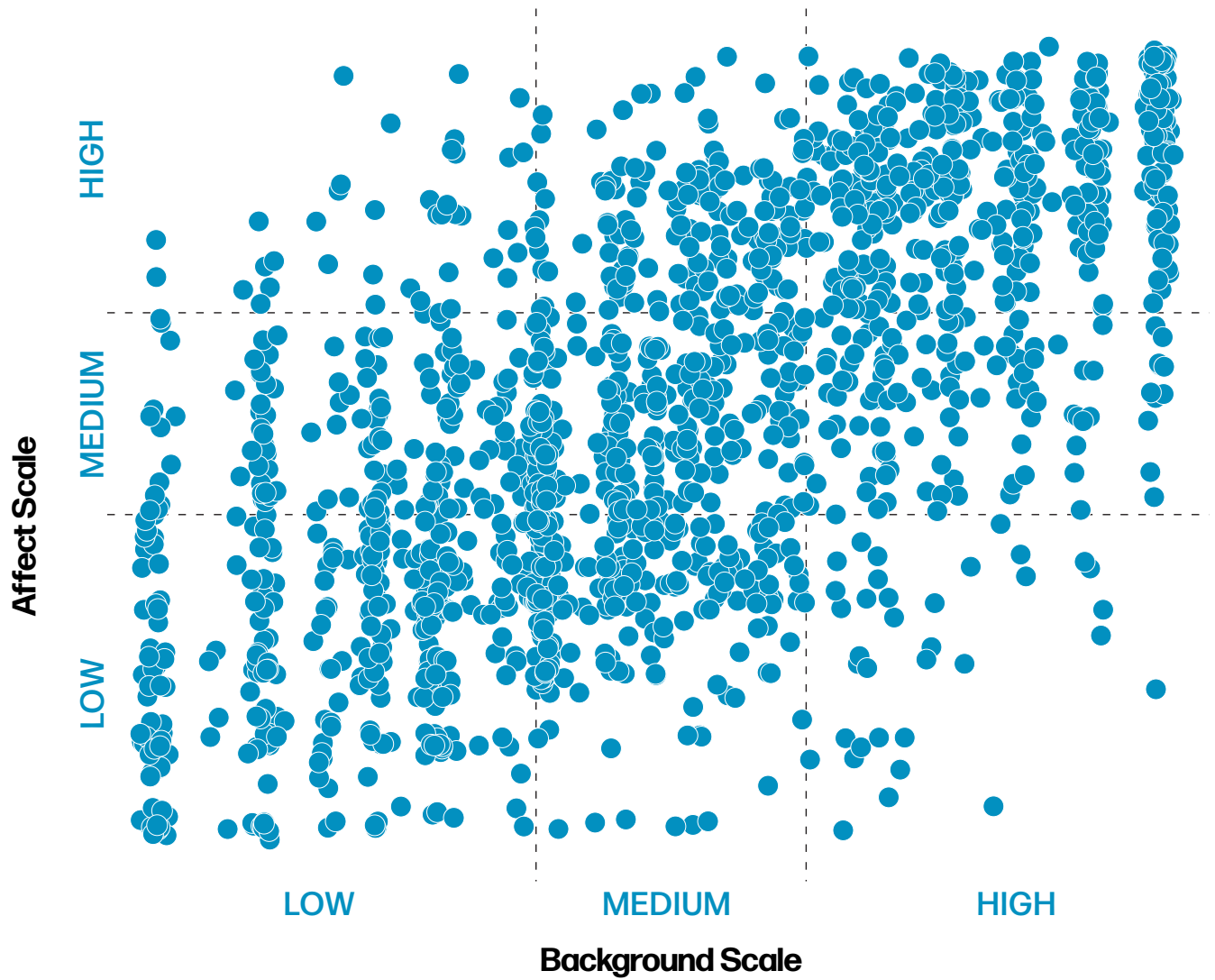
Finally, I gauge the students’ desire to be connected to Jewish life after college. I use this measure in recognition of the fact that for some people, their college years are not a period in which religion or religious culture is a priority, yet they believe that in the future they will care more about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

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

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

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

## C. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFECT AND BACKGROUND



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Where They Go to College

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

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

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

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

