

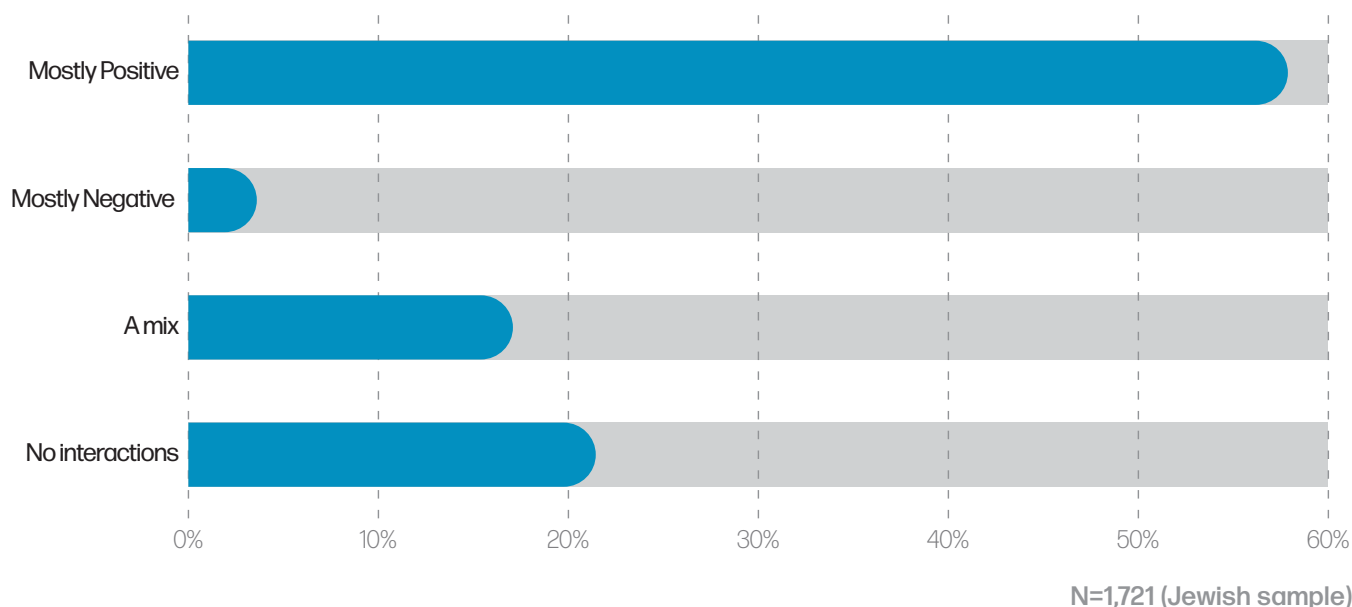
Jewish Programs, Events, and Mentors

I asked students, “How would you describe your interactions with the Jewish community on your campus?” The question does not ask specifically about Jewish programs or organizations on campus (that comes next), but rather asks a more general question about the “Jewish community,” however that is perceived by the respondents.

One in five Jewish students has had no interactions with the Jewish community on their campuses. The majority of the students who have had no interactions with the Jewish community have low scores on *Background* and *Affect*. Only a quarter of the students who have had interactions with the Jewish community have low *Background* and *Affect* scores. Of those who have had interactions, overwhelmingly, they viewed them positively. While 5% said the interactions were mostly negative, 74% said they were mostly positive, and 22% said a mix of positive and negative.

Students who don’t identify as heterosexual/straight were less likely to report positive interactions (52%) compared to heterosexual/straight students (61%). Jewish students of Color who have had interactions with the Jewish community are significantly less likely to have mostly positive interactions (64%) compared to

How would you describe your interactions with the Jewish community on your campus?



White students (77%). The racial differences stem from less positive sentiment among most subpopulations of Jews of Color, including Middle Eastern, Black, multiracial, and Asian students, all of whom reported more negative experiences than White Jews. The Hispanic Jewish students in the sample report similar interactions as White students.

In light of the fact that White and Middle Eastern Jewish students have similar *Background* and *Affect* scores, it is perhaps surprising that the White students are 15 percentage more likely to say their interactions with the Jewish community are mostly positive compared to the Middle Eastern students (77% positive for White students versus 62% positive for Middle Eastern students). There are multiple plausible explanations for this. One is that Jewish communities on campus are more welcoming to the dominant White Ashkenazi population. Another is that the Middle Eastern students are politically much more conservative than the White Jewish students (they are about 30 percentage points less likely to identify as liberal), which could also lead to less positive interactions. And, of course, there are other explanations as well.

Interactions with the Jewish community, though, are not necessarily the same as interactions at formal

events and programs, and as we'll see, experiences at formal programs are quite different according to the respondents.

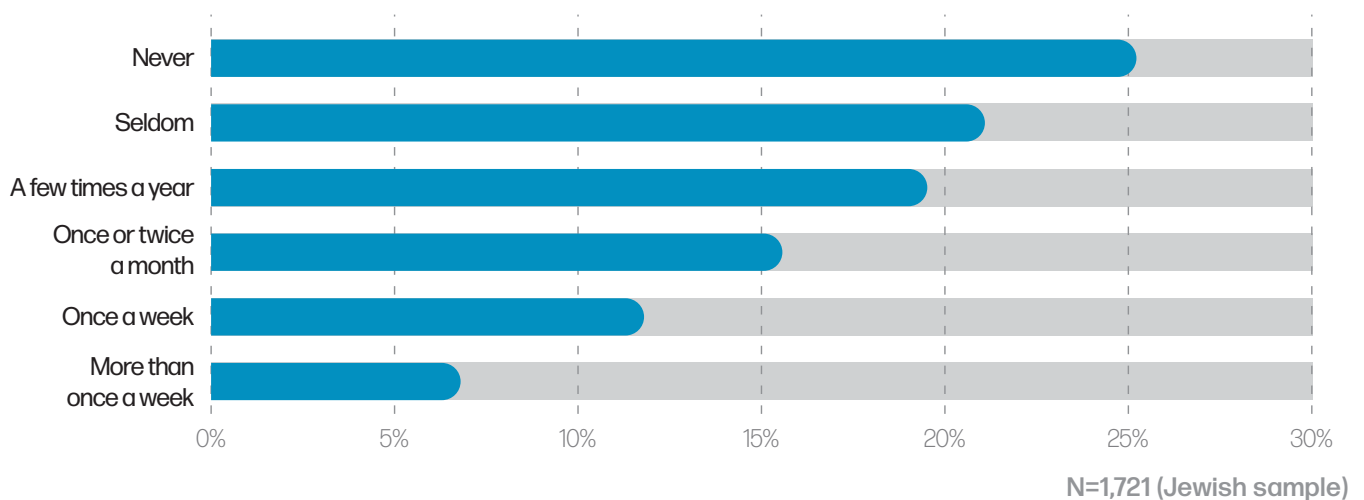
Before analyzing how students feel about Jewish programs, I asked how often students are attending formal Jewish programming on campus.

Just under half (46%) say they never or seldom attend events. About 20% say they attend once a week or more. And the remaining 35% or so report going between a few times a year and once or twice a month.

“You can often go to an event with friends, and then their friends are there so you meet mutual friends. It’s just a great way to meet even more people.”

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How often do you attend Jewish events, activities, and programs on campus?



About half of students with high *Background* scores attend Jewish programs at least once a month, and the other half hardly ever if at all attends. Fewer than 20% of students with low *Background* scores attend monthly or more. Most students with low *Affect* or *Background* scores seldom if ever attend Jewish programs.²⁵

While students who attend regularly and do not attend regularly differ on *Background* and *Affect*, they are quite similar in a number of other respects. Apart from their interest in Jewish life on campus, they offered very

“A lot of people who are in Hillel have been doing BBYO or Hillel for years, and they all know each other. I go to school out of state from where I’m from, and they haven’t seemed as receptive to opening up. It seems like a very small group. So, I’ll go when people that I’m friends with go, but I won’t go outside of that.”

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similar answers to questions, described above, about how they spend their free time or what extracurricular activity brings them meaning. White Jewish students are slightly *less likely* to attend programs regularly than Jews of Color, with Middle Eastern students and Black students in the sample saying they attend regularly at especially higher rates compared to the White students.

I asked students who have gone to Jewish activities on campus if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: **“Going to Jewish activities makes me feel like I belong somewhere.”²⁶**

Jewish students who have attended Jewish activities overwhelmingly agree to this statement. In the whole sample, 85% agree (30% strongly agree). While agreement is higher among students with high *Background* scores, agreement with this statement is widespread. For instance, 74% of those with low *Background* scores agree, compared to 83% for medium *Background* and 92% for high *Background* scores. There is also no variation on this question by racial group, with 80-90% of students in all racial groups agreeing to the statement.

“[Hillel] was really helpful to meet new people that weren’t in the same major or the same academic program I was in, but had similar religious beliefs or had similar backgrounds to me with being Jewish.”

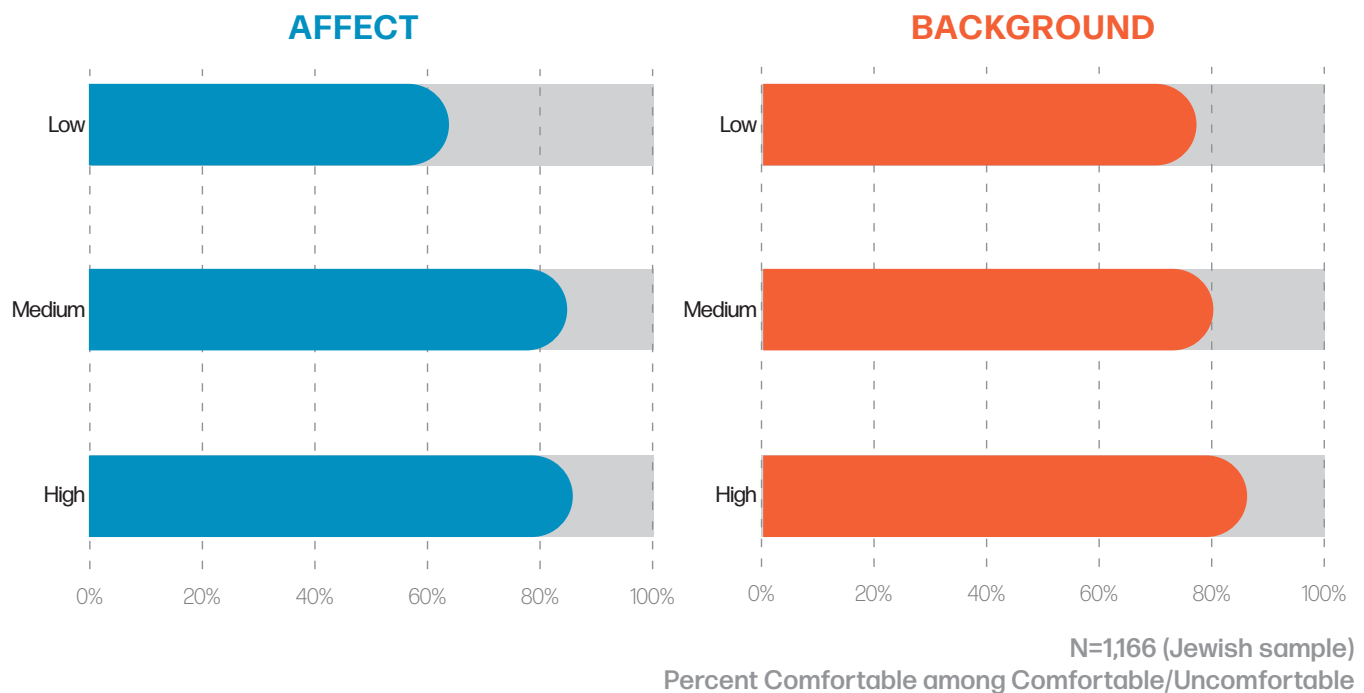
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In another question, I tried to gauge the students' feelings about Jewish events in a different way. I asked if they felt mostly comfortable or mostly uncomfortable at Jewish events, activities, and programs, or they could say they have not attended such events. I then asked them a follow-up to explain their answer in their own words.

Most students who attend Jewish programs, regardless of their background or affect toward Jewishness, are comfortable at these programs. However, those with low *Background* and *Affect* scores are less comfortable

than those with higher values on these scores. Students who are heterosexual/straight and cisgender are more likely to report being comfortable, but the vast majority of students in all gender and sexual orientation categories report being comfortable. By race, Middle Eastern and Hispanic students report being most comfortable (89% in both cases, N=53 for Middle Eastern, N=44 for Hispanic), followed by White students (84%, N=879). Seventy-eight percent of multiracial students (N=78), 70% of Asian students (N=44), and 70% of African American students (N=20) report being comfortable.

How comfortable do you feel at Jewish events, activities, or programs on campus?



“I feel sometimes if I were to go to an event hosted for Jewish students that I would be an impostor, or that I wouldn’t know the right religious terminology and would disrespect someone.”

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In an open-ended question, I asked students to explain why they feel mostly comfortable, why mostly uncomfortable, or why have they not attended any programs.

Here’s what they said:

The students who answered that they feel mostly comfortable at Jewish events noted that they feel welcome in Jewish spaces. In the words of one of the respondents, “I feel comfortable because they are always so welcoming and it’s easy to relate to one another and socialize with new people.” These students paint a picture of walking in the door and immediately feeling at home. In fact, many students note that participating in Jewish events makes them comfortable because the activities and community remind them of home.

The students who answered that they feel mostly uncomfortable at Jewish events also pointed to the community. These students often feel as though there is a small window at the beginning of college to meet other Jewish students and once the opportunity has passed, another one does not arise. Students also

noted that Jewish life on campus feels as though it is for students who grew up in religiously observant households and not for those with different Jewish backgrounds. As one of the respondents noted, “Most of the people have known each other for a long time and have had many more Jewish experiences than me.”

The students who have not attended Jewish events had three main reasons why they don’t go: they don’t know about Jewish events, they have limited time and prioritize other activities, and they do not feel as though they are Jewish enough for Jewish life on campus. “I do not feel like I’m religious enough,” one respondent wrote. Another wrote, “Lack of time as school and other commitments fill my schedule.”

Focusing specifically on Jews of Color, students who feel uncomfortable had a range of reasons, from not feeling like they know enough, to sensing political tensions among students with different viewpoints,

“I would like to be more involved especially around holidays and to celebrate the culture a lot more, but I think the fear of not being Jewish enough, even though that’s contrived, has probably stopped me from being more involved in the community.”

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to feeling out of place on account of their race. As one student put it, “Being biracial is really tough in Jewish communities that are predominantly white – there’s feelings of not belonging and isolation.” Another wrote, “I sometimes feel looked down upon as a black convert.” These statements are important to note; however, they are quite rare among Jews of Color in the sample. Many more Jews of Color observe the welcoming environment in Jewish spaces on campus, pointing to inclusiveness, diversity, sense of community, feelings of acceptance, and connection to like-minded peers.

For many students, part of their connection to the Jewish community on campus is their relationship with a Jewish professional on campus. I asked students, “**Does a mentor or trusted adult on campus know you by name?**” The students could select up to three categories related to Jewish communal leadership (“Hillel Rabbi”, “Chabad Rabbi”, “Another Jewish community professional (e.g., Hillel Staff)”). The students could also select other mentors such as academic advisor, a residential adviser, or a spiritual leader of a different faith tradition.

One-third (32%) of the Jewish sample reported that a Jewish professional knows them by name. More students who have high scores on *Affect* or *Background* say a Jewish professional knows their name compared to those who have low scores on these scales (50-56% versus 12-15%).

The Jewish professional that the largest share of students thinks knows them by name is a Hillel rabbi (27%), followed by another Jewish professional such as a Hillel staff-member (19%), followed by a Chabad rabbi (12%).

The overlap between students who say a Hillel rabbi knows them and a Chabad rabbi knows them is informative. Most students who are known by a Chabad rabbi are *also* known by a Hillel rabbi (56%). However, most students who are known by a Hillel rabbi are *not* known by a Chabad rabbi (25%). This suggests that Chabad mainly has relationships with students who are also integrated into Hillel, while most of the students with whom Hillel has relationships are not integrated into Chabad. But this point shouldn’t be overstated. For over 40% of students known by a Chabad rabbi, they are *not* known by a Hillel rabbi.

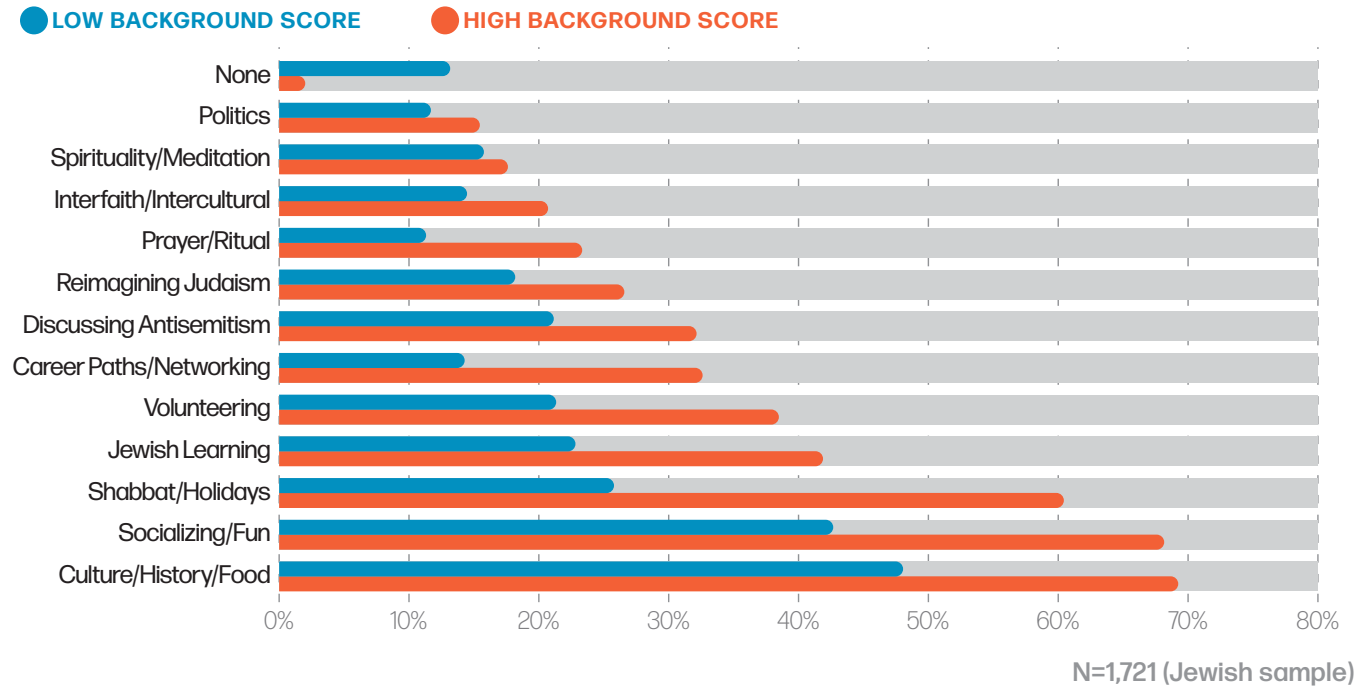
Nearly a third (28%) of Jewish students say they wish they had a stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. It is the students who have higher *Background* and *Affect* scores that are most likely to want this. Those with low *Background* scores are half as likely to say they want a stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor than those with high *Background* scores. Whereas 8% of students with low *Affect* say they wish they had a stronger relationship, 45% of students with high *Affect* report this.

The final question related to Jewish programming on campus invited students to think about what kind of Jewish content would most appeal to them. The

“It’d be cool to have a free place to get Jewish food on campus, available to everyone as well so that other people can explore the food.”

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What kind of Jewish programming would most appeal to you?



students could select up to twelve categories. Some categories focused on traditional religious offerings (Shabbat programming, prayer, Jewish learning), some focused on social and cultural offerings, and some focused on less traditional content such as “reimagining what it means to be Jewish”, “spirituality and meditation”, or “career path and networking”.

The most popular item for students was “culture, history, food” (58%), followed by “socializing and fun” (54%) and “celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays (42%). Perhaps the most illuminating finding is that students from more traditional backgrounds are more interested in every topic (even the less conventional ones) than students from less traditional backgrounds. There is not a single program idea –not politics or career networking, not meditation or interfaith programming – that students from less traditional backgrounds want more than students from more traditional backgrounds.

“Having a mix of [religion and cultural community] is pretty important to Jewish community and I don’t think one can really thrive without the other.”

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“They have something called Shabbat 2000, which is where they try to recruit 2000 different people, mostly Jewish, but Jewish and non-Jewish, affiliated and not so affiliated, to come go to Friday night services, where everybody sits together and prays, and then after you sit down and eat amazing food, and I think it’s such a perfect event...I think an event like that, which not only creates a type of atmosphere that Orthodox students and affiliated students are looking for Friday night, but a safe space for their less affiliated friends and for non-Jews to come and experience that as well, and really just soak in what I personally think happens to be my favorite night of the week, which is Friday night.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
MALE

“We have a Shabbat 1000... and that was so fun. And it was so nice to see a lot of my non-Jewish friends get to experience Shabbat dinner and stuff.”

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“I feel like the [ideal] event that I would have is literally a replication of Shabbat 2000 that was at my school.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
FEMALE

“There are Shabbat dinners held on my campus, but as far as I know, they’re usually about like 50 people, I’m definitely very far off from the Shabbat 1000 or Shabbat 2000 on the rest of your campuses. But, I think holding a larger scale one...would be would be really nice. And just like a good way to introduce things.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
FEMALE

NOTE. The first comment above appeared in one focus group. The three other comments appeared in a separate focus group. These comments arose organically from the student participants.