

## **Religious faith is diversity, too. Higher ed should embrace it**

College students shape and strengthen their beliefs by interacting with peers from different faith backgrounds. That's a very good thing, research shows.

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Robin Chenoweth: College students: They are perhaps among the most-studied individuals in the world.

KCTV announcer: A new study shows college students in particular are really suffering when it comes to their well-being.

WTVN reporter: According to a new poll, 72% of college students surveyed report reproductive health laws in the state ...

KPNX-TV reporter: The National Institute on Drug Abuse finds that the number of college students drinking in the past 30 days dropped ....

Robin Chenoweth: Why? Because gauging the perspectives of college students helps to get a pulse on where the country is heading. But also, studying students helps people who work at universities learn how to make college experiences most impactful — not just academics, but students' development as people. Professor Matthew Mayhew researches higher education and student affairs in Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology.

Matthew Mayhew: What we've done in the trajectory of how we think about our jobs, at least from the field of student affairs and higher education, is, we've embraced this idea of educating, quote, unquote, the whole student.

Robin Chenoweth: The whole student. Considering the student's social, emotional, cognitive development — even their physical and mental health — in light of how that impacts their academic development. The concept of educating the "whole student," first introduced in the 1930s, has led to a host of enhancements at colleges and universities. Consider student unions, recreation and wellness centers, multicultural centers. Even financial aid. The "whole student" approach also has impacted which courses are offered, and the way those courses are taught. Many classes in the last few years, for example, are better at representing diverse students in class materials and teaching. But in one critical area, Mayhew says, most higher education is lacking.

Matthew Mayhew: What I would argue is we've done a very good job at moving that momentum forward, except in the areas of religion, spirituality and secularity. Let's educate the whole student, except we still don't want to talk about religion. And I think part of the reason for that is because of this antiquated understanding of separation of church and state, "Oh, I don't want to touch that; we're a public institution, and I don't want to bring religion into a public institution, because somehow that affronts our sensibilities working in this kind of space." That's just a false way of looking at what the students are bringing to the table.

Matthew Mayhew: My research and others have shown that students consistently turn to their religious background, their religious ideas, as a matter of helping them through struggles on campus, as a matter of helping them persist year to year, as a matter of helping them make career choices in terms of choosing a profession and following a calling as opposed to just getting a job. I mean, there are a slew of different ways that students have used their religion in order to help them grow and help them make good decisions during college. But for some reason, educators kind of stiff arm, if you will, religion when it comes to thinking about educating the whole student.

Robin Chenoweth: In fact, in a 2019 survey of incoming freshmen at 178 four-year colleges, nearly 69% said they had attended a religious service in the previous year. The number was even higher — 75% — for students attending historically Black colleges and universities. In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to Mayhew and three Ohio State students about how becoming a college student impacted their spirituality and changed the way they viewed people whose religious and worldviews were different than their own. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: A common stereotype about college students is that they lose sight of their spirituality once they come to campus. Mayhew, the lead author of *How College Affects Students*, argues that isn't necessarily true. So, our Meghan Beery talked to three students of different faith backgrounds to see what they had to say. Meet Kiya Hailu.

Kiya Hailu: I'm a bio major. I'm a senior, and I'm graduating this summer. ... I'm currently doing undergrad research in entomology and I'm part of like other student organizations that keep me involved on campus.

Meghan Beery: I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your journey with your faith background before Ohio State? And then what that process was like, when you were reevaluating it?

Kiya Hailu: I've definitely had a lot of questions even prior to coming to Ohio State. So, growing up, I've always had some sort of passion for the natural sciences, because I was just very interested in having very concrete answers. And I felt as though that I could get that from scientific research and studying and things like that. ... Although I grew up in a household, Orthodox Christian household. ... The issue was that I had so many questions, and they were all

left unanswered. ... I was just very obsessed with trying to understand creationism, and how there is a God and all of these things, because I was a huge skeptic. And I always wanted concrete answers and I felt like I didn't get that from the faith. And I guess that's the background. Because once I entered college, things changed, because I was able to do my own research and look for answers elsewhere. And I came to a different conclusion.

Meghan Beery: Was there a specific resource for you? Or maybe did you meet other people who helped you to do that to answer those questions?

Kiya Hailu: Despite all of the amount of doubts that I had, I still, for some odd reason, had a desire to have some sort of relationship with a god but I just ... I needed to know that it was real first because it all honestly kind of sounded like fairy tales to me. But my freshman year, I came across these girls who happened to be Christian, and they said I could join them for Bible studies. And I was like, "Oh, why not?" ... I would meet with them every week and we would read Scripture. And all of it just went over my head. I couldn't understand any of it. Towards the end of it, they basically wanted me to come to the faith. And that's when I got nervous. And I kind of just stopped communication from there. A lot of the conversations we had made me question like, "Why do I want this relationship if I don't truly believe?" After communicating with those really nice girls, by the way — they were really kind and welcoming to me — I realized that I just needed to do some of my own research.

Robin Chenoweth: Of course, maybe not every college freshman does this. But Hailu dug deep. She began reading the works of prominent atheists like Ray Comfort and Mark Spence and watching debates among Christians and atheists.

Meghan Beery: Did you ever look to any of the other faiths? I know that Christianity itself encompasses so many different sects, but like Buddhism; did you ever read about that or look into any of that?

Kiya Hailu: Interestingly enough, Christianity was kind of like the last place I looked for some reason. I would look everywhere, but the Bible. So, I did — I looked heavily into Islam. I looked into another Abrahamic faiths, because I just from everything that I've researched, it just seemed as though that of the Abrahamic faiths, they've had a lot more substantial evidence for their claims in their scriptures. I didn't necessarily read any scriptures within Buddhism and all those other polytheistic religions. But I did look into arguments between atheists and other theists who weren't monotheistic.

Robin Chenoweth: You get the point. Hailu attacked her questions about religion like she solved a tricky problem in the biology lab. Purposefully. With passion.

Kiya Hailu: A lot of the atheists that I was watching and reading, they would basically describe that if there was some sort of sovereign, intellectual, uncreated ontological creator — I can't necessarily repeat the arguments here — but they were saying that if a supernatural realm did exist, then there would only be one ontological creator, when it makes sense for it to be more

than one, I guess. But there's like a whole bunch of arguments that go into that. So, I was pretty much convinced that if there was a supernatural realm, then it would have to be one of the monotheistic religions, and especially the ones with a lot more evidence for their claims. So that's how that worked out for me.

Robin Chenoweth: Though Hailu was quite intentional in her research, this sort of exploration — figuring out what you believe and where that fits into the world — is one of the things that makes the college experience so valuable, Mayhew says.

Matthew Mayhew: What we do know from the research — and this dates back to like 1950 and '60 — is that students oftentimes experience college as a time for real exploration. And society willingly just suspends judgment over students on what they're actually doing during college so that they can explore. If they want to take a break and they want to say, “All right, I was raised, say, an evangelical Christian, and I really am meeting other people and looking and seeing all these prayer spaces. And there's all these opportunities for joining all these different associations I didn't even know existed” — when they start seeing all of those things on a college campus, it might encourage them to dive deeper into their faith, to really make sure, “Hey, this is something I really want to ground myself in and identify with.” And so having resources at their fingertips by way of not only people but libraries, chaplains, interfaith spaces, whatever they might be, really gives students access to learning more about other folks, which in turn, leads them to learn more about themselves.

Robin Chenoweth: And the interactions with students of varying beliefs — like Hailu's Bible study or simply by living with a college roommate of a different faith — are key to some pretty transformational development in students' lives. More about Mayhew's research on this in a bit. But first, Meghan and I decided to bring Hailu together with students of different faiths to see what they had to say.

Gary Sung: Hey, guys. I'm Gary.

Robin Chenoweth: This is Gary Sung.

Gary Sung: I'm a senior in electrical engineering minoring in business as well. And I'm part of an organization called Falun Dafa practice group. It's a meditation practice for the mind and body. ... So, coming in as a freshman, I was just interested in like robots, and like I did in high school. ... But it was also a period to like change myself. So I explored a whole bunch of different clubs; I explored a bunch of activities. And I kind of rejuvenated my interest toward Falun Dafa. Because I've been practicing along with my parents when I was very young, but I was just following along with them. I wasn't really doing it independently. So it got me thinking, if meditation and these kinds of practices can really benefit me in terms of like stress, in terms of energy, then shouldn't I be doing it more? ... I started to do meditation on campus, like on Oval, outdoors. People would just see me, out there practicing and occasionally, I get people to ask, “Hey, what's this about?” There were a bunch of Christians actually, that came up and just asked, “Do you believe in the afterlife? What do you have after death?” That kind of thing. Because they haven't really

interacted much with Buddhist practices or Taoism, these Asian faiths or beliefs. ... A lot of the beliefs are very common, such as the belief in God, such as belief in like destiny, or fate, these kinds of things. And so when I shared these ideas, the Christians were, they were very interested. ... So, it was a good interaction. I found they're very wholesome.

Robin Chenoweth: So, they were pretty open to the idea that you were practicing a different faith, but they saw the correlations with their faith.

Gary Sung: Right. Yeah.

Khalid Dada: I can kind of touch off of that.

Robin Chenoweth: Here's Khalid Dada, a graduating senior in public management leadership and policy at John Glenn College.

Khalid Dada: I also grew up in a home that was always pretty conservative, and we practice Islam at home. And I always have lived only a few minutes away from our mosque. ... We're very ingrained in the community. And I also have a large family that's also all practicing. So, it was always like kind of a part of me. ... Going into college, it was something that I wanted to make sure that stayed with me because it's very easy to go away from what is being practiced at home. College is just an easy environment to get to be yourself or find yourself. But I knew that this was something that I wanted to stick.

Robin Chenoweth: So, Dada joined the Muslim Student Association and served as president for two terms.

Khalid Dada: We are one of the largest Muslim student associations across the nation. It's been a shaping factor for campuses as what Muslim representation on campus means. So I've been able to fight for a lot of Muslim accommodations and being able to get Muslims a seat at the big table on campus. And I truly believe that that's strengthened how I interact with my faith.

Robin Chenoweth: Dada is also part of Ohio State's Interfaith Council, which supports spirituality and faith development of students but also promotes interfaith cooperation and religious diversity on campus. Hearing these students talk about their faith raises the question, are they outliers on campus? So many headlines talk about students walking away from their faith. I asked Mayhew how college impacts students' faith, or as some of the research calls it, their "worldview."

Robin Chenoweth: The collective student body in America, is it changing? Are they becoming less religious, or more religious or more, more attuned with faith than they have been in the past?

Matthew Mayhew: That's a great question. And I think as constructs emerge, it's difficult to know how students are embracing certain ideas like religion, versus other ideas like spirituality.

So, a lot of times you'll read in the press that students might be losing their religion when they go to college. And that's not necessarily the case, students might be less likely to identify with a particular religion, but it doesn't mean they're not growing spiritually. And, so, we have to be very careful with how we use these terms to understand what actually students are going through.

Robin Chenoweth: So, what are they going through?

Matthew Mayhew: Our research does show that over time, over four years of college, students do make serious gains in what we call interfaith learning and development. But to break that down, it means that students are growing in their appreciation for students who identify with different faith traditions, right? So, as you come through the door, no matter where they go, private school, public school, large school, small school, when they come through, they have a certain appreciation, say, for Muslim students and for Islam. After four years of college, all students grow in that appreciation.

Robin Chenoweth: Think about those students who talked to Gary Sung on the Oval when he was meditating.

Matthew Mayhew: Now, students do grow in that appreciation to different levels, or different magnitudes and trajectories, based on the experiences they have in college. But what we're able to actually see in the research is, going to college actually does kind of influence the way students think about folks from different religious groups. And college influences it positively.

Robin Chenoweth: He's talking about the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Study that he did with Interfaith America and Alyssa Rockenbach of North Carolina State University. The study surveyed more than 7,000 first-year students at 122 colleges and universities about their attitudes toward religious diversity. So the study considered not just students' feelings about their own faith, but their appreciation of other students' religious views. Then it tracked changes in those attitudes across their college years. As the researchers combed the data, they started to see patterns at some of the campuses, where students were making greater strides in their appreciation of other people's views. So, they dug down to find out why.

Matthew Mayhew: We went to those campuses and said, "Okay, your students are showing growth in these dimensions. What do you think that's all about?" And we ask students, faculty, and staff, so they can nuance some of the findings ... in these areas of kind of interfaith development, in the area of growing appreciative attitudes toward evangelical students, toward Jewish students, toward Islam, those kinds of things.

Robin Chenoweth: And they found a few key elements.

Matthew Mayhew: In the first year of school, what we saw was the most important thing had to do with whether a student made a friend who held a worldview different than theirs.

Robin Chenoweth: And that could be like a roommate or a study partner, or somebody in a club?

Matthew Mayhew: Correct. But I'd push it a little more, Robin, to say the students identified that person as a friend, not a peer in class that had a different worldview than them, right? If they were able to develop a close friendship with somebody with a different worldview, that motivated their learning, that actually drove learning in a positive direction, especially for appreciation of not only that group... so, if I am an Evangelical student, and I made friends with a Jewish student, and that would of course, well hopefully help me grow my appreciation toward Judaism. But it also helped them grow in their appreciation toward all groups. So, it opened their eyes to religious differences to such a degree that they kind of open their hearts to appreciating more groups from different faith traditions.

Robin Chenoweth: All of the students we spoke to had these experiences, where their interactions expanded how they thought about their own faith but also how they thought about others.

Kiya Hailu: A lot of the interactions I had were with people that I was familiar with, like I said earlier, like atheist friends, Muslim friends, stuff like that. We would just have fruitful, respectful discussion about just, you know, different beliefs and different things of that sort. For example, I'd have conversations while we were studying for chemistry or something my freshman year. We were discussing, "Does God exist? But how does God exist?" and all these kinds of things that my friend allowed me to question my own beliefs, and I allowed her to question her own beliefs.

Robin Chenoweth: Khalid Dada.

Khalid Dada: I've had the pleasure of being able to be in a lot of formal interfaith gatherings. But then also like non-formal, just with some of my Jewish friends or Christian friends, or whatever they may be. There's just been times where, like Kiya said, we're just sitting around studying whatever the case may be, and just a thought occurs, and we'll just start having good conversation and talk further about religion.

Robin Chenoweth: Regarding those formal and informal group interactions, those are significant, too, according to Mayhew's research findings.

Matthew Mayhew: Students who participated in at least one academic related interfaith engagement saw growth. And students who participated in at least two informal social activities saw growth.

Robin Chenoweth: That could be a class, like a comparative studies course on religion, or a group, like the informal Bible study Hailu attended.

Matthew Mayhew: As long as the educator or the person in charge of those activities were able to really help students work through the dissonance that came with encountering difference.

Robin Chenoweth: Cognitive dissonance — the mental discomfort that comes from holding conflicting beliefs, values or attitudes — like saying you accept diverse faiths but then making snide comments about someone's religion. This dissonance can cause some people to reject, explain away or just retreat.

Robin Chenoweth: I read in your writings about the survey, that increased diversity, left unengaged, can threaten social cohesion. It seems like that's happened in the United States in general. Am I right?

Matthew Mayhew: Yeah, well. I think that increased diversity, without having the proper supports in place to really navigate what that actually means and how people are experiencing that, I think it could lead to erosion of confidence that we can kind of come together, it often leads to stereotyping. The literature does talk about that. Students will retreat to stereotyping if they encounter difference, and the dissonance that comes with difference and that that dissonance isn't supported well and responsibly by educators in the space. It's why college is so cool. That's why we need DEI. That's why we need things going on in college, because college is the one place where educators could actually design responsible contexts for those kinds of productive exchanges to occur and support those contexts. When you get outside of higher education, when you go into corporate or you go into other spaces, those aren't necessarily equipped with the people who know how to facilitate those kinds of arrangements. And so without that educated, facilitated kind of way of going about managing productive exchange, then retreating to stereotype happens, probably some negative consequences, negative behaviors might result, etc. etc.

Robin Chenoweth: One more thing Mayhew's research found: The ways that colleges and universities support religious diversity really matter.

Matthew Mayhew: Something that is pivotal and something where the research is now taking us into a different direction is if institutions had policies specific to encouraging religious, spiritual and secular diversity on campus, then their students, or the students that enrolled at those institutions, were likely to see develop or experience developmental gains.

Robin Chenoweth: Hmm. So, what would that look like? A policy, but how does that get put into action?

Matthew Mayhew: Are there bias reporting protocols in place when students experience religious bias? How are faculty enacting their value of appreciating religious differences when it comes to Ramadan? Are faculty making students take major test tests right now, during Ramadan, when students are fasting? Are there policies in place that require faculty to put things in their syllabi, to encourage the kind of a welcoming climate for all religious groups? These are the kinds of policies we're talking about. And many colleges have them, but most do



not. ... On a college campus, there are certain cues that people will be able to see, by way of how the college prioritizes religion for different peoples all across campus. For example, prayer spaces. You might never need to use a prayer space. But if you know there's one that exists, or you pass by it every day on your way to a certain class, that will cue you something about the values of the institution.

Robin Chenoweth: Prayer and meditations rooms are something the students we interviewed talked about at length. Here's Gary Sung.

Gary Sung: I was walking around Dreese Lab, that area. I saw a student just in a corner. And she was what I thought to be praying ... just out in the open. ... So, I came up to her and asked, like, I know another place where you can do the praying. It's just a classroom, empty classroom. I go there all the time. So, you don't have to go in this little corner.

Khalid Dada: That was a great story that you've pointed out, Gary.

Robin Chenoweth: Khalid Dada.

Khalid Dada: And that's something that happens often. So when I came in as the president here, I believe we had around eight prayer spaces across campuses. And our push from day one was always to be able to fight, like, have a prayer space, one in at least every building across campus. And we haven't reached our goal yet but we have definitely ... we've doubled the number. I believe we're at 15 or 16 now across campus. Some of those we've pushed and fought for, but some of them colleges came to us and introduced those spaces to us and let us know that they have them there.

Robin Chenoweth: Actually, Ohio State University has more than 30 meditation and prayer spaces across four campuses. Three are in College of Education and Human Ecology buildings. But, obviously, not enough students know about them. Check our episode notes to find out more. You might be wondering where Kiya Hailu ended up. After her intense exploration of different faiths, and landing on the belief in monotheism based on the evidence she found, she determined that evolution and creationism are not mutually exclusive. Here's Meghan Beery with Hailu again.

Meghan Beery: You talked about being a scientist: We have a theory, we have a hypothesis, we need evidence. And so I think it's very cool how you combined that in your search, because I know a lot of people who don't think that those two can necessarily coexist.

Kiya Hailu: Once I've determined like, okay, there definitely is a creator, a cause to the universe — that's when I had to look into a lot of the claims that Christianity made and to see if it historically lined up. And it was, it was honestly crazy how much I found out that I didn't know before. I realized, I guess not for all Christians, but it wasn't necessarily blind faith. A lot of people had very, very substantial evidence for believing what they believed in. So, I was eventually convinced after looking at everything.

Matthew Mayhew: Students are more likely to what we call “self-author” their worldview commitments.

Matthew Mayhew: When they come into college, they're exposed to a lot of differences and they have a lot of different experiences. And as a result of that exposure, students oftentimes they don't necessarily leave the religion they started with, they come back to it and they strengthen it based on entertaining those different perspectives, based on understanding where other people are coming from, and having to make meaning of their own religion given kind of those experiences.

Robin Chenoweth: Hailu returned to her Orthodox Christian faith, this time with much greater understanding, and founded the Orthodox Tewahedo Club at Ohio State. Like Sung and Dada, her expanded views of others forever changed how she now views her own faith.

To see a list of meditation and prayer spaces at Ohio State University, see the link in our episode notes. Also found in transcript, below.

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## **Prayer, meditation and wellness rooms at The Ohio State University**

### *Prayer and meditation spaces*

[Interfaith Prayer and Reflection Room](#), 3020C [Ohio Union](#)

- Categorized as a meeting room for groups. Request [here](#).
- Contains two ablution and two meditation rooms

Interfaith Prayer Room, 246 [Atwell Hall](#)

[Meditation and Reflection Room](#), 191 [Arps Hall\\*](#)

Meditation and Reflection Room, 291 [Campbell Hall](#) (closed during building renovation)

[Meditation Room](#), 360E Health Sciences Library in [Prior Hall\\*](#)

Meditation Room, 008 [Meiling Hall](#) (medical students only)\*

[Quiet Room](#), A225 [PAES Building\\*+](#)

[Quiet Room](#), 251 [ElectroScience Laboratory](#)

- Available during open hours and [reservations](#)

[Quiet Room](#), 178 [Knowlton Hall\\*](#)

Quiet Room, 223D [Gerlach Hall\\*](#)

[Quiet Room](#), 507 [Denney Hall\\*](#)

- Sign-up required

Sanctuary Space, 1120B [Dodd Hall](#)

[Sanctuary Space](#), S501, S510 [Rhodes Hall\\*](#)

[Sanctuary Space](#), S558 [Rhodes Hall+](#)

Sanctuary Space, 224 [Dulles Hall\\*](#)

Sanctuary Space, 040 [Eighteenth Avenue Library](#)

#### Wellness Spaces

Wellness Room, 038 [Agricultural Administration\\*](#)

[Wellness Room](#), 057 [Thompson Library\\*](#)

- Sign-up required

Wellness Room, 764 [Prior Hall](#)

[Wellness Room](#), 050 and 060 [Eighteenth Avenue Library](#)

- Can be reserved for group events [here](#)
- Available to individuals when not reserved

Wellness Room, 249 [Heminger Hall](#)

Wellness Room, 371 [Heminger Hall](#)

Wellness Room, 410D [Kinnear Rd., 1275-1305\\*+](#)

Wellness Room, 155R [Kunz-Brundige Franklin County Extension Building](#)

Wellness Room, 160C [Mount Hall\\*](#)

Wellness Room, 1250D [Schottenstein Center+\\*](#)

- Refrigerator available
- Found outside Seating Section 104

Wellness Room, 237 [University Hall+](#)

- Sign-up required

Wellness Room, 0010 [Veterinary Medical Center\\*](#)

Wellness Room, 115 [Waterman — Controlled Environment Agriculture Research Complex](#)

Wellness Room, 936 [Doan Hall\\*](#)

### **Rooms on regional campuses**

Meditation and Reflection Room, 132 Morrill Hall, Marion Campus

Meditation Room, 211 [Conard Learning Center, Mansfield Campus](#)

Sanctuary Space, 209 [John and Christine Warner Library and Student Center, Newark Campus\\*](#)

Wellness Room, 112A [Fisher Auditorium — Wooster Campus](#)

\*Access controlled

+Water available