

## **ABSTRACT**

MAPLES, GORDON WILSON. Student Religious Accommodation Policies and Non-Christian College Student Perceptions of Institutional Support: A Mixed Methods Dissertation (Under the direction of Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach).

This dissertation study explores the relationship between the presence and quality of student religious accommodation policies and non-Christian student perceptions of institutional support and welcome with the goal to improve institutional policies and campus climates for non-Christian college students in the United States. The research employed a sequential multi-phase mixed-methods design incorporating directed content analysis, multilevel regression analysis, and document analysis. This allowed me to assess the quality of religious accommodation policies, test their relationship to student perceptions of institutional support and welcome, and explore patterns within and between institutions where students reported the most welcoming and supportive climates for their religious identities. This study was guided by critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT) and the minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate framework (MRSCC), which informed the sample selection, choice of included variables, and the development of the policy assessment instrument. The first phase, a content analysis, examined collected institutional religious accommodation policies from 122 colleges in the United States, mirroring the institutional sample from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). The second phase of analysis incorporated the results of the first phase as independent variables—along with other student-level and institution-level independent variables collected as part of IDEALS—into multilevel regression models to analyze dependent variables representing non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression and institutional welcome for non-Christian students. The final phase of the study involved analyzing institutional documents and characteristics to identify

patterns between and within institutions that received the highest mean scores from their students on the second phase's dependent variable measures. The study found that a majority of sampled institutions lacked religious accommodation policies, while the ones that did exist were largely insufficient to equitably serve the practicing needs of non-Christian students. While neither the presence nor quality of religious accommodation policies predicted non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for their spiritual expression within the full regression models, they were significant negative predictors of non-Christian student perceptions of welcome for non-Christian religious identities. Findings from the third phase indicated that positive student perceptions of institutional support and welcome for non-Christian identities are more likely to be related to more visible programming and curricular offerings around the topic of religion on campus, such as institution-hosted research centers, academic departments dedicated to religious studies, or interfaith campus activities. The key takeaways from these findings include a pressing need to renovate existing religious accommodation policies at universities and for more colleges to develop religious accommodation policies, as many currently lack them. The findings also indicated that there are significant differences in non-Christian student perceptions of their institutions based on institutional location (geographic region and urbanicity) and religious affiliations (notably Evangelical colleges), which will require further study to contextualize. For higher education administrators, policymakers, faculty, and staff in general, the findings of this study are tantamount to a call for mass reform of student religious accommodation policies through legislation, institution-level action, and active student advocacy.

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Student Religious Accommodation Policies and Non-Christian College Student Perceptions of Institutional Support: A Mixed Methods Dissertation

by  
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development

Raleigh, North Carolina  
2023

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife. Without her inspiration and support, this couldn't have been possible.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Gordon W. Maples was born and raised in Huntsville, AL. He graduated from the University of Alabama, where he was heavily involved in the college's chapter of the Secular Student Alliance. Following graduation, he worked for the national Secular Student Alliance, training student leaders and activists across the country. He received his Masters in Higher Education Administration from Vanderbilt University, where he worked in the Office of the University Chaplain and Religious Life and the Office of Assessment. While at North Carolina State University, he worked as a Graduate Research Associate for the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) and the Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular (INSPIRES) Campus Climate Index.

His research interests include higher education communications; qualitative methodologies; religious, secular, and spiritual (RSS) diversity; and the portrayals of higher education in popular culture, among an assortment of other topics relating to colleges and college students.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I cannot express enough thanks to my wife, Oleander Barber, for her immense patience, support, and sacrifices throughout the process of working towards completing this dissertation. Thanks to my family and friends for sticking by—or at least tolerating—me on this quixotic journey into academia. My committee members, Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach, Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles, Dr. Jenny Small, Dr. Peter Hessling, and Dr. Paula McAvoy, were all immensely helpful throughout the writing of this dissertation and were fantastic instructors over the years leading up to it. Additionally, many thanks to my other professors from both NC State and Vanderbilt University, from whom I have learned so much along the way: Dr. John Braxton; Dr. Vandna Bindra; Dr. Angela Wiseman; Dr. Callie Womble-Edwards; Dr. Lisa Bass; Dr. Brenda McKenzie; Dr. Matthew Shaw; Dr. Christopher Loss; Dr. Michelle Falter; Dr. Patricia Marshall; and so many others. My immense gratitude to my co-authors and colleagues who have taught me so much about scholarship and excellence over the years through collaboration and leading by example with their excellent work. Thanks to the countless students and former co-workers of the Secular Student Alliance across the country who taught me more about higher education, activism, and the pursuit of a better world than any textbook or classroom could hope to. Finally, a special thank you to my research assistants (read: cats) who—while not overtly helpful or particularly supportive—did make life better throughout the process.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Religious and spiritual diversity is a prominent element of the modern American university in the public mindset. Campuses across the country have countless student organizations dedicated to various Christian denominations, a smattering of minoritized religions, and the occasional varied nonreligious group as well (Coley et al., 2022; Liddell & Stedman, 2011). However, upon closer examination, college campuses are not the equitable space for all religious, secular, and spiritual identities that some may believe them to be. Reflecting the power imbalance between Christians and non-Christians on college campuses in the United States is the excess of student religious accommodation policies at universities. Though such documents are also essential to many non-Christian practices, they are often effectively powerless, excessively complicated to invoke, or in some cases, entirely absent (Maples et al., 2021). Non-Christian college students navigate a landscape where Christian holidays, norms, and practices are institutionalized and privileged, while their own practices are relegated to the margins of campus life, if not entirely erased (Blumenfeld, 2020; Maples et al., 2021; Mubarak, 2007).

### **Prior Studies on Religiously Minoritized Students**

Several studies have addressed the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of college students from various marginalized religious groups, including Muslims (Cole et al., 2020; Mubarak, 2007; Nasir & Al-amin, 2006), Jews (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015), atheists (Crandall et al., 2017; Liddell & Stedman, 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2015), agnostics (Armstrong, 2017), and Hindus (Chander, 2013). Other studies have focused on how religiously minoritized students from specific traditions are perceived by their peers on campus (Bowman et al., 2016; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Mayhew et al., 2018). It has been documented that non-Christian

students largely do not perceive their institutions as welcome to or supportive of their religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs), particularly when compared to their Christian peers (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Bowman & Smedley, 2013). At least one study indicated that first-year religiously minoritized students are less likely to continue to their sophomore year of studies than religiously majoritized students (Patten & Rice, 2009).

Historically, specific religiously minoritized groups have been deliberately excluded from—or at least minimized within—certain higher education institutions in the United States, as was the case throughout the twentieth century with Jewish prospective students and institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Princeton (Brodkin, 2002; Golden, 2006; Karabel, 2005; Riddle, 2022). Religiously minoritized students may experience alienation on campus due to their religious minority status and, in some cases, can experience hostility, discrimination, or hate crimes rooted in biases such as antisemitism or islamophobia (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Kosmin & Keysar, 2015; Maruoka, 2008; Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). Notably, religious-based hate crimes rose starkly on US college campuses from 2009 to 2017, indicating that the tangible social effects of Christian hegemony in higher education are a current concern and are certainly not relegated to the past (Government Accountability Office, 2019). Even in the absence of overt hostility or discrimination, religiously minoritized students may face challenges through implicit biases and structural barriers to their success, such as insufficient religious holiday accommodations or a lack of halal or kosher food options on campus (Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). While many private universities, such as Vanderbilt University (“History of Vanderbilt University,” n.d.), Wake Forest University (“North Carolina Baptists sever ties...,” 1986), or the University of Southern California (Jervey, 1958), have explicit Christian denominational affiliations or former historical ones, even public universities in the United States often reflect

Christian-centered norms in their academic calendars, dietary offerings, day-to-day schedules, or physical campus structures, such as chapels (“Chapels,” n.d.; Maples et al., 2021; “MSU Union – Alumni Chapel,” n.d.; “Paris-Yates Chapel,” n.d.). Given the normalization of Christianity in the United States, the students who are most likely to require the invocation of a religious accommodation for their practices are non-Christian, religiously minoritized students who encounter barriers due to the Christian hegemonic elements often embedded in these policies (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al., 2021). Notably, the utilization of a religious accommodation policy by a non-Christian student can be met with ridicule, derision, or public debate (Bartlett, 2007; Gragreen, 2010; Juda, 2018) or, in some cases, can be outright denied (Maples et al., 2021). Interestingly, despite the disproportionate need for religiously minoritized students to navigate these policies, the exploration of non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support has not previously been connected to the presence or quality of institutional religious accommodation policies for students.

### **Prior Studies on Religious Accommodation Policies**

Broadly speaking, college student religious accommodation policies are documents that explicitly state a higher education institution or system’s procedures and rules for accommodating the specific religious needs of their students when the status quo on campus is not sufficient to meet those needs. These policies often focus on providing instructions for requesting required classroom absences for holiday observances, provisions for project and paper deadline extensions, stating the location and availability of prayer spaces, or covering other potential student religious-related needs.

Only a handful of studies have focused on student religious accommodation policies at higher education institutions. Most recently, Maples et al. (2021) presented a qualitative

document analysis study that focused on identifying the practical shortcomings and manifestations of Christian hegemony within religious accommodation policies currently enacted at United States universities. While the study identified many causes for concern and has provided important groundwork for this work, it had several limitations. First, the design of the study did not allow for the inclusion of institutions without religious accommodation policies. Given that neglect of the needs of non-Christians is a key manifestation of Christian hegemony, the wholesale absence of a religious accommodation policy is important to acknowledge and is itself a dramatic manifestation of Christian hegemony (Blumenfeld, 2006). Second, the Maples et al. (2021) study only accounted for some dimensions of institutional characteristics—namely, region and public/private status. In particular, the lack of accounting for the religious affiliation of sampled institutions was a noted limitation within the study. Lastly, while the Maples et al. (2021) study analyzed religious accommodation policies, it did not provide a means of assessing the quality of these policies.

Another notable study was conducted by Arnold and Sasso (2018), who researched religious accommodation policies at public Midwestern universities to examine how well they accommodated students from non-traditional belief groups. They concluded that, while an effort was apparently made by universities, the policies could only be utilized if the students felt comfortable enough to directly request an accommodation. On campuses where state laws forbid professors from disregarding students' beliefs at face value, there was some degree of security for students from marginalized religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs) seeking an accommodation. The authors also found that some religious accommodation policies provided an avenue for students to appeal or file a grievance if they felt an accommodation request was denied unfairly. However, they also found that policies varied significantly by institution, were

often less accessible and consistent in states that did not have explicitly binding state laws around college student religious accommodations, and were occasionally non-existent at smaller or mid-sized universities. The authors ultimately concluded that the religious accommodation policies they analyzed were lacking in support for students from non-traditional belief groups. One of the most prominent limitations of Arnold and Sasso's (2018) study was its sample, which was limited to public Midwestern universities. While the study indicated numerous problematic elements within religious accommodation policies, it primarily served to identify that a problem existed and was limited in its pragmatic guidance for practitioners seeking to improve their institutions' policies.

In a chapter focused on religion and spirituality among Asian American students, Park and Dizon (2017) analyzed a handful of student religious accommodation policies and holiday calendars, noting that they varied from institution to institution in both their quality and inclusivity of non-Christian traditions. The authors concluded that the shortcomings of these policies likely further marginalized Asian American students who identify with marginalized RSSIs. The study focused on the connection between a marginalized racial identity and marginalized religious identities, which is important to note for the practical effects insufficient policies can have on institutional equity for marginalized students in general.

Lastly, one of the most detailed studies into student religious accommodation policies was a report commissioned by the Council of Ontario Universities in 1998 (Reed, 1998). While this report concerned only Canadian institutions, the findings regarding impact on students are relevant to the current study. The report concluded that universities that decline to provide religious accommodation policies for students "present barriers to full participation" (Reed, 1998, p. 7) for members of religious groups who cannot separate their religious beliefs from their



daily lives. Additionally, the researchers found that students required accommodations extending beyond class absences, including athletic training policies, dietary provisions, prayer spaces, and allowance for practices like candle burning. Perhaps most importantly, the report indicated that students were dissatisfied with current policies, saying that they were "insufficient to enable them to participate as full members in the ... [campus] community" (Reed, 1998, p. 9). Many of these students expressed growing impatience over the difficulties they faced in obtaining appropriate and dignified accommodations from their institutions. Many of these policies required students to ask their professors directly for accommodation, which resulted in "psychologically intimidating" (Reed, 1998, p. 18) negotiations, putting students at risk of discrimination based on their marginalized RSSIs.

### **Problem and Purpose**

It has been documented that non-Christian students largely do not perceive their institutions as welcome to or supportive of their religious, secular, and spiritual (RSS) identities, particularly when compared to their Christian peers (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Research has also indicated that many religious accommodation policies that are currently enacted at American universities are embedded with elements of Christian hegemony—the social system by which Christian privileges and advantages are institutionalized, to the detriment of non-Christians (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al., 2021). Given the normalization of Christianity in the culture of the United States—and by proxy within its many colleges and universities—the students who are most likely to require religious accommodations for their practices are non-Christians, who subsequently encounter barriers due to the Christian hegemonic elements embedded in these policies (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al., 2021). Religious accommodation policies reflect Christian hegemony through their lack of power to

functionally accommodate non-Christian student needs, their reproduction of Christian-centered norms, and their manifestations of neglect through a lack of maintenance and necessary updates to or even the complete absence of a policy (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al. 2021). Further, the utilization of a religious accommodation policy by a non-Christian student can be met with ridicule, derision, or public debate (Bartlett, 2007; Grasgreen, 2010; Juda, 2018).

The research on student religious accommodation policies has not previously included the documentation of non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for their spiritual expression. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to specifically examine and analyze the relationship between the presence/quality of student religious accommodation policies and non-Christian student perceptions of institutional support and welcome in order to help improve institutional policies and create more welcoming and supportive campus atmospheres for non-Christian college students in the United States. This study also aims to identify patterns and themes within standing religious accommodation policies and other institutional characteristics that are associated with higher non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support and non-Christian RSSI welcome in order to provide practical guidance for policy improvement to higher education leaders.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does the presence and/or quality of a higher education institution's student religious accommodation policy predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?
2. What, if any, patterns exist in the institutional characteristics and student religious accommodation policy texts at institutions where non-Christian students perceive the

most welcoming and supportive environments for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study operates under the hybrid inquiry worldview of critical pragmatism, which incorporates elements of both critical and pragmatic worldviews. Notably, the purpose of the study is pragmatic in its focus on a practical outcome and critical in its foci on challenging the social power structure of Christian hegemony and pursuing equity along religious, secular, and spiritual identity lines. Jenny Small's (2020) critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT) guides this research, specifically its focus on challenging manifestations of Christian privilege and hegemony in higher education institutional policy. Additionally, Cole et al.'s (2020) minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate (MRSCC) framework will be tested in its applicability to all non-Christian students rather than to Muslim students alone. Specifically, Dimension 1 and Dimension 5 of MRSCC will be applied to this study. Dimension 1 predicts that "religious or faith-based institutions are likely to have a differential influence when compared to secular institutions" (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303), while Dimension 5 predicts that when a higher education institution's organizational and structural features promote a positive religious and spiritual climate, Muslim students will have fewer experiences with insensitive peers on campus, experience less coercion to reconsider their worldview, and generally fewer negative interactions with others who have different religious, faith, and spiritual traditions on campus (Cole et al., 2020).

### **Description of the Methods**

This study utilizes a definition of mixed methods research attributed to John Creswell, which identified it as "a research design...in which the researcher collects, analyzes, and mixes

(integrates or connects) both qualitative and quantitative data” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 119). Specifically, this study employs three distinct methods, which were “mixed” throughout the study: content analysis, regression analysis, and document analysis. Content analysis was used in the first phase to evaluate collected university religious accommodation policies. Subsequently, it was used to create two original independent variables used as part of the multi-level regression analysis in the second phase of the study. The second phase utilized these two new independent variables, which respectively represent the quality and presence of religious accommodation policies at the selected higher education institutions, to perform multi-level regression analyses with dependent variables representing fourth-year non-Christian student perceptions of institutional support for their RSSIs at their colleges and their perceptions of a welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, which were both previously collected as part of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey study (IDEALS). The multi-level models use students as the unit of analysis to focus on how religious accommodations policies (along with other student- and institution-level variables) are related to their perceptions of welcome and support (the dependent variables). For the third phase, I identified five sampled institutions with the highest non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression and perceptions of institutional welcome for non-Christian RSSIs and conducted a document analysis on their religious accommodation policies and other relevant documents to identify common themes.

This mixed methods study followed a sequential design modified from the form presented by Creswell et al. (2003) to account for three rather than two phases. This multiphase design was implemented to allow for the third phase of analysis, where a qualitative collective case study uses quantitative findings from the second phase to bound the cases. The addition of

the third stage hybridized the sequential exploratory and explanatory mixed methods designs into an iterative, recursive design, making the study both exploratory and explanatory in focus (Christ, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). The relationship between the qualitative Phase 1 and quantitative Phase 2 was in line with sequential exploratory design, with the Phase 2 quantitative data used to explore the themes identified in the qualitative Phase 1 (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018). The relationship between the quantitative Phase 2 and qualitative Phase 3, however, is modeled on a sequential explanatory design. The quantitative findings from Phase 2 were used to bound the qualitative case study data analyzed in Phase 3 (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018). The two qualitative stages, Phase 1 and Phase 3, functioned in tandem as methodological triangulation through the utilization of multiple, distinct qualitative methods to analyze the same data (Miles et al., 2014). This hybridization of methodological design—and the flexibility of a recursive approach—was justified by the pragmatic theoretical worldview of this study, which places the opportunity for knowledge production over the maintenance of methodological norms (Christ, 2007).

The rationale for utilizing mixed methods for this study stemmed from the necessary correlative design to study the topic: the content of religious accommodation policies is qualitative in nature, whereas the data on student perceptions of institutional space and support is quantitative. In order to analyze the relationship between these data, content analysis was embedded in the design to effectively translate the qualitative data into a quantitative form. The ultimate use of document analysis was practical, as the goal of this study was to provide guidance to practitioners, and the rich descriptive data from that analysis were more likely to identify emergent themes.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study expands the literature base on student religious accommodation policies in higher education and contributes to the growing higher education sub-field of critical scholarship focused on religious, secular, and spiritual diversity and equity. Additionally, this study builds on the limitations of previous scholarship. Namely, the scope of the inquiry and sample of this study was deliberately broader than previous studies that have directly addressed religious accommodation policies at universities, such as those by Maples and associates (2020) and Arnold and Sasso (2018), which has led to more detailed and broadly applicable—and hopefully more powerfully compelling—findings. Similarly, the deliberate integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods into this analysis was designed to emphasize both depth and breadth. As such, this study was able to delve deeply into both the content of religious accommodation policies and how students experience their institutions in a way that connects the disparate forms of data and identifies the relationship between them.

Perhaps most importantly, the greatest significance of this study should be its practical outcomes: materials and guidance for administrators and policymakers on how to craft (and revise) more equitable religious accommodation policies for college students. The instrument developed for this study to assess the quality of religious accommodation policies (Appendix A) should be relatively easy for administrators, staff, faculty, or students to self-implement and compare with their own current policies to determine areas for potential improvement.

Additionally, this study aims to bring attention and awareness to the religious—and specifically Christian—dimension of the power dynamics and inequitable landscape of today's college campuses in the United States, which is often an invisible and neglected element of critical scholarship in the field. In terms of theory, this study tests the application of Cole et al.'s

(2020) minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate framework beyond a population of solely Muslim students to determine its wider applicability and identifies potential areas for improvement on the framework to better fit a broader population of the religiously marginalized.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an initial overview of the present issues facing religiously minoritized college students in the United States, an introduction to the concept of Christian hegemony and its relationship to higher education, and a review of current analyses of college religious accommodation policies. Additionally, the research question, problem, and potential significance and limitations of this study were outlined alongside an abridged introduction to the methodological approach and theoretical framework that underscore the study. Chapter 2 will provide a more detailed review of the extant literature relating to the experiences of religiously minoritized college students, university religious accommodation policies, and Christian hegemony. Lastly, Chapter 2 concludes with a review of the study's theoretical framework, including an explanation of the inquiry worldview and an exploration of the two substantive content theories that inform the study. Chapter 3 will cover the overall methods for the study in greater detail, including an outline of the data collection, analysis, variables, and instruments utilized throughout the three phases of the study. Chapter 3 concludes with notes on ethical considerations and positionality as they relate to the overall study.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY**

This literature review will begin with the extant literature on the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of college students from the various marginalized, non-Christian religious groups present on college campuses in the United States. An overview of the concept of Christian hegemony and its relation to higher education in the United States follows, and the review concludes with a thorough exploration of literature relating directly to religious accommodation policies at universities.

### **Non-Christian Religiously Minoritized College Students**

Several studies have addressed the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of college students from various non-Christian religiously minoritized groups, including Muslims (Cole et al., 2020; Maruoka, 2008; Nasir & Al-amin, 2006), Jews (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015), atheists (Crandall et al., 2017; Liddell & Stedman, 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2015), agnostics (Armstrong, 2017), Buddhists (Sharma & De Alba, 2018), and Hindus (Chander, 2013). Other studies have focused on how particular marginalized religious groups are perceived by the general population of college students on campus (Bowman et al., 2016; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Mayhew et al., 2018). Based on the findings of other studies, non-Christian students largely do not perceive their institutions as welcome to or supportive of their religious, secular, and spiritual identities, particularly when compared to their Christian peers (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Bowman & Smedley, 2013). At least one study indicated that first-year religiously minoritized students are less likely to continue to their sophomore year of studies than religiously majoritized students (Patten & Rice, 2009).

Historically, specific minoritized RSSIs have been deliberately excluded from certain higher education institutions, as was the case with Jewish would-be students and Harvard



(Brodkin, 2002; Golden, 2006). Religiously minoritized students may experience alienation on campus due to their religious minority status and, in some cases, can experience hostility, discrimination, or hate crimes rooted in biases such as antisemitism or islamophobia (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Kosmin & Keysar, 2015; Maruoka, 2008; Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). Even in the absence of overt hostility or discrimination, religiously minoritized students may face challenges through implicit biases, microaggressions, and structural barriers to their success, such as insufficient religious holiday accommodations or a lack of halal or kosher food options on campus (Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). Given the normalization of Christianity in the United States, the students who are most likely to require the invocation of a religious accommodation for their practices are non-Christian, religiously minoritized students, who subsequently encounter barriers due to the Christian hegemonic elements often embedded in these policies (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al., 2021). Notably, the utilization of a religious accommodation policy by a non-Christian student can be met with ridicule, derision, or public debate (Bartlett, 2007; Grasgreen, 2010; Juda, 2018; Mubarak, 2007), or in some cases, can be outright denied (Maples et al., 2021). Interestingly, explorations of non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support have not previously been connected to the presence or quality of institutional religious accommodation policies for students, despite the disproportionate need for such policies among religiously minoritized students.

Small and Bowman (2011) documented the importance of socialization with peers of similar religious beliefs, perceived faculty support for spiritual/religious development, and religious engagement across the board for college students of all backgrounds. However, they also noted that religiously minoritized students were particularly sensitive to their campus

religious climates and were less likely to perceive religious support from faculty than their religious majority peers (Small & Bowman, 2011).

In a similar vein, a study of nonreligious college students concluded that the nuances of campus environments, such as institutional characteristics, played a crucial role in determining how those students perceived their religious campus climates (Rockenbach et al., 2015). Other works have noted nonreligious student sensitivities to institutional practices that are perceived to omit or marginalize them, such as ceremonial benedictions and invocations (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Liddell & Stedman, 2011). Though working with a limited sample, Patten and Rice (2009) found that first-year college students whose religious beliefs did not align with their religious college's affiliation were significantly less likely to persist into their sophomore year than their peers, which further raises the question as to the effects of institutional characteristics on religiously minoritized students. Additionally, it is notable that socialization with peers of similar religious beliefs—cited as having notable benefits by Small and Bowman (2011)—may not be a realistic option for all religiously minoritized students, particularly if they are members of stigmatized religious groups or if their affiliation lacks the population numbers to effectively organize on a college campus (Coley et al., 2022).

Shammas's (2015) study of Muslim college students found that perceived discrimination lowered students' general sense of belonging on campus. Further, their findings indicated that Muslim American college students were two-to-four times more likely to feel discriminated against when compared to non-Muslim students (Shammas, 2015, p. 81). While these perceptions of discrimination are certainly the cumulative result of many experiences on many different campuses, a 2007 speech given by Hadia Mubarak, the president of the national Muslim

Students Association, cites the need for prayer spaces as particularly key for Muslim college students across higher education institutions:

Of all religious requirements, the ability to fulfill Islam's religious mandate to pray five times a day is of primary concern to Muslim students. Securing a clean and relatively quiet space to pray their daily prayers on campus is perhaps the most important religious accommodation that Muslim students seek in college...the lack of proper facilities for Muslim students to pray their five prayers often forces students to choose between fulfilling their religious responsibilities or their academic ones. At Florida State University, for example, some students felt too timid or shy to pray in public areas due to the unnecessary exposure it would place upon their individual faith. (p. 5)

Aside from Muslims, the specific challenges faced by Jewish college students have also been a subject of exploration. Based on a sample of Jewish college students surveyed across 20 universities in the United States, Sales and Sax (2006) reported that the effect of attending college for Jewish students was to become generally less observant of and attentive to their religious practices (p. 1). They attribute this largely to an overall climate of neglect regarding college students' spiritual and religious development by "leaving it in the hands of the ministries [and] outside agencies that exist on the margins of the campus" (p. 1) and relegating religion to the "peripheral of campus life" (p. 3). They specifically note the existence of structural barriers to religious practice on campus, such as the lack of formal "allowance for religious holidays" (p. 15), which can prevent Jewish students from honoring holidays like Yom Kippur without serious academic repercussions. According to a 2015 report, 6% of Jewish college students directly experienced antisemitic bias from faculty, and 3% reported the same from university administrators (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015, p. 7). However, the majority of polled Jewish students

(54%) reported some experience with antisemitism on their campuses (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015, p. 3).

Beyond the aforementioned studies focusing on various nonreligious, Jewish, and Muslim college students, there are very few studies that offer any kind of detailed look into the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of minoritized religious college student demographics outside of this set. One to-date unpublished study found that Pagan college students were far more likely than non-Pagan students to perceive pressures to conceal or change their RSSI and were similarly far more likely to report tense and hostile interactions on campus than their non-Pagan peers, which points to a less-welcoming perception of campuses among college-going Pagans (Maples, 2023). In a quantitative study on religious affiliation and student success, Bowman and associates (2014) specifically noted that a commonality between Buddhist and Hindu students was the “lack of literature that explores their experiences” (p. 5). While the study did find that Buddhists reported being less satisfied with their academic experience than other religious identity groups, it had few other significant findings (Bowman et al., 2014, p. 13).

Part of the invisibility of these smaller RSSI groups in higher education scholarship is certainly due to a tendency of quantitative scholars to “lump together...religious minorities...into a large, heterogeneous group” because “the sample sizes for each religion are often too small to examine” (Bowman et al., 2014, p. 3). While this has allowed for analysis of an amalgamated “other,” or “religious minority” group composed of various RSSIs, it has disincentivized deep explorations into the experiences of specific smaller marginalized religious groups.

Though the various marginalized religious groups have many differences between them, we are aware of some key commonalities in their challenges within higher education. These

include a lower perception of acceptance on campuses and insufficient religious accommodations for their practices. While nonreligious students are less likely to encounter the structural impediments of requesting prayer space or invoking a religious holiday absence policy, their sensitivity to religious campus climates is notable and connects their experiences with those of other religiously minoritized groups.

### **Christian Hegemony**

The concept of Christian hegemony is central to understanding the experience of non-Christian religious minoritized students attending college in the United States. Hegemony is described by critical scholars as the process and structures through which a dominant group successfully disseminates its specific social reality and vision in such a manner as it becomes accepted as normal and universal, often even by those not in the dominant group (Blumenfeld, 2020; Gramsci, 1971). Christian hegemony applies this concept specifically to religion, where Christianity is institutionalized in the United States in such a way that it is reflected in social structures, policies, and normative behaviors (Blumenfeld, 2020). Christian hegemony is an often-subtle force that establishes and perpetuates the notion that all people are or should be Christian by excluding the needs, concerns, religious cultural practices, and life experiences of non-Christians (Blumenfeld, 2006). As explained by Small and associates (2022), Christian hegemony is not just the engrained prioritization of “Christian holidays, beliefs, morals, and practices over non-Christian religious holidays, beliefs, morals, and practices” but also the disguising of that phenomenon “under a veil of neutrality” (p. 9). Put another way, Christian hegemony is a self-perpetuating, largely concealed system of pro-Christian biases and privileges that entwines with social institutions like higher education to the detriment of non-Christians.

### *Christian Hegemony within Higher Education*

As institutions with a long history in the United States, colleges and universities are engrained with society's Christian hegemonic norms. The very origins of higher education in the United States were Christian in purpose, emphasizing a Christian notion of character-building (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Marsden, 1994). Many universities have historically excluded non-Christians from admission through implicit and explicit means, which further established strong roots for Christian hegemony in the academy (Golden, 2006). For instance, Jewish would-be students were specifically discriminated against in the admissions processes at institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Princeton throughout the twentieth century (Brodkin, 2002; Golden, 2006; Karabel, 2005; Riddle, 2022). This Christian hegemonic legacy is reflected today in institutional policies, titles, priorities, formal event customs, behavioral codes, campus structures, and even in the food served on campuses (Blumenfeld, 2006; Bowman & Smedley, 2013; Clark & Brimhall-Vargas, 2003). Many private higher education institutions in the United States have explicit Christian denominational affiliations or have historical ties to one. For instance, while secular institutions today, Vanderbilt University, Wake Forest University, and the University of Southern California, were all at one time denominationally aligned with Christianity ("History of Vanderbilt University," n.d.; Jervey, 1958; "North Carolina Baptists sever ties..." 1986). Even public and otherwise secular higher education institutions in the United States today may feature chapels, holiday schedule breaks that implicitly or explicitly correspond with Christian observances, and dining offerings that neglect halal and kosher accommodations (Maples et al., 2021; Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016). According to the Government Accountability Office, religious-based hate crimes on US college campuses rose

starkly from 2009 to 2017, indicating that the effects of Christian hegemony in higher education are a current concern with tangible impacts on the lives of students (2019).

Student religious accommodation policies are themselves a manifestation of Christian hegemony in higher education: the only reason they are necessary is that Christian practices, customs, and holidays are privileged in academic structures and systems to the extent that many non-Christian practicing needs require formal aberrations from the accepted norms of the setting (Maples et al., 2021). However, these accommodation policies are themselves products of a Christian-centric system and are likely to insufficiently serve the practical needs of non-Christian students who need to use them (Maples et al., 2021).

### **University Religious Accommodation Policies for Students**

Many universities have explicit religious accommodation policies for their students, which may include formal processes for receiving excused class absences, access to facilities for their practices, exemptions to dress codes, dietary accommodations, and other necessary concessions related to their practicing needs (Maples et al., 2021). However, as products of institutions in a society where Christian hegemony is entrenched, these policies often reflect Christian privileges, norms, and perspectives and can be Christian-centric themselves (Maples et al., 2021). The process of trying to invoke these policies can involve signing verification statements, providing formal documents signed by religious leaders, filling out numerous forms, and other formal barriers, and students may still have their accommodation request denied without an explicit avenue for appeal (Blumenfeld, 2006; Maples et al., 2021)

Cases where an institution does not have a religious accommodation policy for its students are themselves manifestations of Christian hegemony. As noted, the hegemony of the dominant group often functions and perpetuates by omitting, excluding, and erasing the needs

and perspectives of non-dominant groups, which for Christian hegemony is manifested in the absence of religious accommodation policies, which are often necessary for non-Christian students to practice (Blumenfeld, 2006).

### ***Notable Applications***

Student religious accommodation policies have occasionally generated controversy or inordinate attention in the public eye. In 2010, George Washington University established women-only swim hours in the pool facilities once a week at the formal request of the school's Muslim Student Association (Grasgreen, 2010). News of this accommodation spurred fiery public debate over student religious accommodations, gender discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia (Grasgreen, 2010). In 2018, a Vanderbilt University student published an opinion editorial detailing their unsuccessful struggle to navigate the institutional process for student religious accommodations after a professor denied their initial request, which spurred a renovation of the policy (Juda, 2018). In 2007, the mere use of a religious accommodation policy by a Pagan student to observe Samhain at Marshall University received press coverage in *The New York Times* (Bartlett, 2007).

### ***Legal Background***

Just as higher education institutions are embedded with Christian hegemony, so are the laws of the United States. Due to the many laws and rulings that relate to student religious accommodation policies, it is not unusual for legal phrases to appear in the texts of policies, carrying over their Christian hegemonic elements (Maples et al., 2021). In particular, the legal phrases “sincerely-held religious beliefs” and “undue hardship” have been found throughout student religious accommodation policies, and both phrases can be interpreted as hegemonically microaggressive to non-Christians (Maples et al., 2021). These phrases may even find their way



into policies via state laws that require colleges to provide accommodation policies with specific stipulations (Chapter UWS 22, 1993; Locallo, 2012; Student Religious Accommodations Amendments, 2021).

A last legal element that relates to religious accommodations is the often-misunderstood establishment clause of the First Amendment. Research has indicated that higher education administrators lack an understanding of how the “religion clauses” of the First Amendment relate to colleges and spread misinformation about their applications (Goodman et al., 2015). Specifically, some higher education workers have expressed the inaccurate belief that religious accommodations violate the establishment clause (Goodman et al., 2015). It is plausible that these misunderstandings could color institutional policies, perpetuate the absence of policies, or generally lead to poor guidance for students seeking accommodations. While the reasons for these misunderstandings are certainly numerous, contributing factors likely include an abundance of caution and general aversion to programming that could lead to any legal entanglements on the part of administrators at public institutions, as well as a general lack of guidance on how to program around religion and spirituality from professional student affairs organizations (Goodman et al., 2015).

### ***Prior Research***

Prior research on student religious accommodation policies at higher education institutions has been scant. However, multiple studies have at least touched on the topic over the last five years. In 2017, Park and Dizon published a chapter that focused on religion and spirituality among Asian American students, which included an analysis of a handful of institutional religious holiday calendars and religious accommodation policies. They noted variation in the quality and non-Christian inclusivity of policies and calendars from institution to

institution and concluded that the deficiencies of many policies likely further marginalized Asian American students who identify with marginalized religious, secular, or spiritual identities (RSSIs; Park & Dizon, 2017).

In the following year, Arnold and Sasso (2018) published a study that analyzed student religious accommodation policies at public Midwestern universities, with a particular focus on how well they accommodated students from non-traditional belief groups. Much like Park and Dizon, Arnold and Sasso noted some key shortcomings of their analyzed policies. For instance, they found that many policies could only be utilized if students felt comfortable enough to directly request an accommodation from an authority (Arnold & Sasso, 2018). On some campuses, they found that state laws mandating accommodation policies and formal appeals processes offered students a degree of security from professors who could disregard students' accommodation requests at face value. On other campuses, the law might not be on the student's side, and an institutional religious accommodation policy might not even be present at all, let alone provide an avenue for appealing a professor's decision (Arnold & Sasso, 2018). Arnold and Sasso's (2018) study concluded that the religious accommodation policies they analyzed were lacking in support for students from non-traditional belief groups.

Most recently, Maples et al. (2021) presented a qualitative document analysis study that focused on identifying practical shortcomings and manifestations of Christian hegemony within the texts of religious accommodation policies at United States universities. This study identified concerning elements of policies and documented their presence in many enacted religious accommodation policies: requirements for students to sign faith verification statements, non-inclusive language, and the absence of appeals processes among them. The sample of policies for this study was both larger and wider than that of Arnold and Sasso (2018) and was diversified by

regional geographic distribution in the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West and a broad range of institution types, including public two-year, public four-year, and private institutions (Maples et al., 2021).

While these most recent studies have brought religious accommodation policies under scholarly scrutiny, the most detailed research into student religious accommodation policies is found in a 1998 report commissioned by the Council of Ontario Universities (Reed, 1998). While this report concerned only Canadian institutions in the province of Ontario and is now decades old, its findings are powerful and appear consistent with subsequent studies. The report, which was based findings on interviews with students, faculty, and staff at multiple universities, concluded that universities that decline to provide religious accommodation policies for students "present barriers to full participation" (Reed, 1998, p. 7) for student members of religious groups who cannot separate their religious beliefs from their daily life. Additionally, the study found that students often required accommodations extending beyond class absences, including athletic training policies, dietary provisions, prayer spaces, and allowance for practices like candle burning (Reed, 1998). The report indicated that students were dissatisfied with current religious accommodation policies and both perceived and experienced the barriers embedded in them (Reed, 1998). For instance, students noted that many policies required them to approach their professors directly for accommodation, which resulted in "psychologically intimidating" (Reed, 1998, p. 18) negotiations that put students at risk of discrimination based on their marginalized RSSIs.

### ***Critiques of Policies***

Critiques of religious accommodation policies have arisen throughout the various studies on the topic. The prominent studies by Park and Dizon (2017), Arnold and Sasso (2018), Maples

et al. (2021), and Reed (1998) all outlined similar concerns about the insufficiencies of these policies, whether it related to their language choices, their outlined processes, their lack of effective power, or their exclusion of non-Christian practices. Studies have additionally noted how the lack of RSSI diversity training and knowledge on the part of college faculty, staff, and administrators creates hardships for students seeking accommodations and may have the impact of further marginalizing students due to those hardships (Chander, 2013; Goodman et al., 2015; Park & Dizon, 2017; Reed, 1998). This lack of RSSI diversity knowledge on the part of higher education authority figures could also contribute to the insufficiency of religious accommodation policies, as they may not perceive problems with the policies that people with RSSI diversity training would.

### **Institutional Characteristics**

Prior literature has done little to explore the differences in religious accommodation policies or differing experiences of non-Christian students at institutions with varying characteristics. Maples et al. (2021) analyzed religious accommodation policies from public two-year, public four-year, or private colleges with a minimal criterion for diverse institutional characteristics. However, the study did not distinguish private colleges based on their religious affiliation and did not perform any analyses based on the collected institutional characteristics. While Cole et al. (2020) provided a prediction that “religious or faith-based institutions are likely to have a differential influence when compared to secular institutions” (p. 303), there was ultimately little in their findings to support that prediction.

Many secular colleges in the United States have explicitly Christian roots, and even those that do not are still embedded with Christian hegemony as a product of being institutions in the United States (Blumenfeld, 2006; Chiorazzi, 2016; Cowan, 2005). Because of this, there may be

fewer salient differences in the experiences of non-Christian students at different institution types than anticipated by past studies. The most extremely Christian-centered institutions only admit students who are Christian, so non-Christians are not subject to experiences at those institutions at all. Public (and therefore secular) institutions additionally grapple with the specter of the often-misunderstood establishment clause, which can chill efforts to engage with or discuss matters of religious diversity due to widespread misunderstandings of its application (Shaheen et al., 2021). This fear of the establishment clause on the part of university personnel—and subsequent tendency to avoid religion and spirituality—could impact how non-Christian students experience public campuses compared to private ones.

Other studies have reported findings that are potentially relevant to this study, as they highlight differences between institution types pertaining to RSSI diversity. One study indicated that students attending Evangelical-affiliated institutions were less likely to develop friendships with individuals from other RSSI backgrounds than students at other types of colleges (Rockenbach et al., 2019), and another found that students attending public and Evangelical institutions were less likely to receive religious diversity education in their first year of college than students at Catholic, Mainline Protestant, or private-nonsectarian institutions (Rockenbach et al., 2018). That latter study also surveyed students about how often they discussed the topics of religion or spirituality with faculty members at their institution: students attending Evangelical colleges reported the highest rate (58%), followed by those at Catholic institutions (43%), students attending Protestant institutions (34%), students at private-nonsectarian institutions (28%), and followed lastly those attending public colleges (22%; Rockenbach et al., 2018). Another study found that students attending public colleges report experiencing higher rates of religious coercion than students attending other types of institutions (Rockenbach et al., 2017). A

2015 study by Bowman and associates found that Catholic institutions were associated with more positive religious campus climates, while public and Evangelical institutions were associated with more negative religious campus climates. These studies, however, sampled students from all RSSIs and did not report on differences across those RSSIs as part of their findings. While these studies provide some context for why students might perceive their institutions differently in reference to RSSI welcome and support, the findings from these studies largely reflect the responses of Christians due to their sampling.

This study additionally adds some nuances missing from prior studies. First, these earlier studies have not examined the role of specific policies on non-Christian student perceptions and experiences on their campuses. Additionally, this study has allowed for direct comparisons between how non-Christian students perceive their institutions across different institution types, which has not previously been documented.

### **Effects of Religious Accommodation Policies on Non-Christian Students**

#### ***“Nones”***

The group that has often been labeled as the “nones” (Pew Research Center, 2012)—atheists, agnostics, the nonreligious, no religion, none of the above, secular humanists, and an assortment of other secular sub-categories—are a complicated group to discuss when it comes to both Christian hegemony and religious accommodation. As explored by Edwards (2021), this group includes many who were socialized as Christians and likely still benefit from Christian hegemony. The effects of Christian hegemony exist on different levels: the closer an individual is to the dominant norm of white Christian Protestantism, the more they benefit from Christian hegemony and privileges (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012). For instance, someone that may currently identify as agnostic could have been raised Catholic and still celebrate Easter and

Christmas with their families. Such a person would benefit from Christian hegemony more than a Muslim due to the norms they were raised with and the holidays they continue to honor. At the same time, they would benefit from Christian hegemony less than a currently-practicing Baptist.

However, others within the “none” category may have come from marginalized religious traditions and may similarly retain the practices that they were socialized with. For example, a professed atheist may still maintain a kosher or halal diet, which may necessitate the use of an accommodation policy. A study of nonreligious students indicated that regardless of socialization, they may be hyper-aware of some manifestations of Christian hegemony, such as the presence of Christian symbols on secular buildings (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). Another study found that nonreligious students may be particularly sensitive to public displays of Christianity, such as public proselytization (Shaheen et al., 2022). Essentially, it is difficult to assess what, if any, practicing or accommodation needs “nones” may require. Therefore, it is difficult to estimate how the presence or quality of religious accommodation policies might impact them.

### ***Minoritized Religious Faiths***

Students from non-Christian minoritized religious groups—including Muslims, Hindus, Pagans, Jews, Sikhs, and Jains—are likely the collective group most impacted by both student religious accommodation policies and Christian hegemonic norms in higher education. There are any number of holidays and specific practices relating to minoritized religious groups that would necessitate accommodation, such as strict dietary needs on campuses, required prayer spaces, or specific rule exemptions that would otherwise impede religious practices. The prominent applications of religious accommodation policies included in this literature review, for instance, all relate to minoritized religious practices (Bartlett, 2007; Grasgreen, 2010; Juda, 2018).

However, literature that has focused on minoritized religious group experiences in higher education has often not tied the experiences of these groups explicitly to Christian hegemony or student religious accommodation policies (Chander, 2015; Cole et al., 2020). When studies have noted the importance of these elements on minoritized religious group experiences, the analysis has been somewhat limited (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Park & Dizon, 2017). The status quo of the present literature is that the relationship between religious minoritized student campus experiences and deeply institutionalized Christian hegemony (and, by extension, student religious accommodation policies) on those campuses has not been well-documented but is at least suggested through student narratives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Inquiry Worldview**

This study operates under a hybrid inquiry worldview that incorporates elements of both the critical and pragmatist paradigms. In line with a critical worldview, this research features a critique of an existing power structure within higher education: namely, Christian hegemony. However, the purpose of this study is primarily pragmatic in that it is oriented on the practical outcome of informing higher education policymakers and administrators and, ultimately, pursuing greater equity within existing institutional policies. The focus of this study was to better identify—and ideally offer a solution to—a problem that has been suggested within present practices, which is further indicative of a pragmatic paradigm. However, the problem being addressed is one of inequity, which also mandates a critical perspective. Thus, the inquiry worldview of this study can be described as falling within the hybrid paradigm of “critical pragmatism.”



## **Substantive Content Theories**

Two substantive content theories provided a foundation for this study. The first provided the central focus and purpose of the study and influenced decisions around the sample parameters. The second contributed to the choice of variables and provided predictions that were tested by the analysis.

The first substantive content theory guiding this study was Small's (2020) critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT), a critical theory that addresses religious diversity, Christian privilege, and Christian hegemony in the United States. Specifically, CRPT is designed to analyze institutions that are ingrained with the hegemonic norms of Christianity and, by doing so, highlight the effects of Christian normativity on society. As described by Small (2020), the two primary goals of CRPT are to "acknowledge the central roles of religious privilege, oppression, hegemony, and marginalization in maintaining inequality between Christians and non-Christians in the United States" and to subsequently identify ways to combat those inequalities (p. 11).

CRPT has seven explicitly stated tenets. The first tenet of CRPT states that the "subordination of non-Christian (including nonreligious) individuals to Christian individuals" (Small, 2020, p. 63) is systemic within the United States and institutionalized within its college campuses. The second tenet specifies the purpose of CRPT as an explicitly intersectional theory that "embraces an intersectional analysis of religious identity with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity" (Small, 2020, p. 63). The third tenet states that CRPT specifically aims to expose Christian hegemony and privilege in society. The fourth tenet is that the theory advocates for the "pluralistic inclusion" (Small, 2020, p. 63) of all RSSIs and recognizes their power over

individuals. The fifth tenet advocates for higher education research, policy, and practice to consider marginalization, power, and privilege in relation to RSSIs. Tenet six states that religious pluralism should be the means of resolution for religious conflicts in the United States. Lastly, Tenet seven explicitly states that the theory prioritizes the “voices of individuals with minoritized religious identities” (Small, 2020, p. 63).

Part of CRPT states that there is a pressing need to challenge Christian privilege and hegemony by using a pluralistic lens to analyze existing higher education policies and practices for their manifestations of privilege and hegemony. The purpose of this study is in line with this aspect of CRPT in that it follows previous work that has identified student religious accommodation policies as bastions of Christian hegemony within higher education (Maples et al., 2021). Further, this study aims to better outline the consequences of unchecked Christian hegemony for non-Christian students within higher education institutions in the United States by connecting the deficiencies in accommodation policies to non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support on their campuses. This study’s focus on non-Christian marginalized religious students is also rooted in CRPT. Because of the centrality of Christian hegemony to the theory, minoritized religious groups tangentially or culturally tied to Christianity – such as the Quakers – are excluded from the analysis. While they are debatably religious minorities, their norms, such as holidays, are likely to some degree in line with Christianity, like the holidays they celebrate. For the same reason, Christian groups that experience degrees of marginalization, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses or Eastern Orthodox adherents, are also excluded from the focus of this study due to their direct connections to various Christian practices, iconography, and language norms. Such experiences with Christian hegemony are not likely to be comparable to students who are from religiously minoritized

backgrounds that are fully outside of Christianity. Lastly, in accordance with CRPT's emphasis on not just the power dynamics surrounding religion but the acknowledgment of the interplay between religious identities and other identity dimensions like gender, race, and sexual orientation, an array of student identity demographics were included in the Phase 2 regression models and analysis of student perceptions (Small, 2020, p. 13). The document analysis of Phase 3—which emphasized open coding—nonetheless maintained a critical eye toward manifestations of Christian hegemony throughout the analyzed documents.

This study also utilized Cole et al.'s (2020) minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate (MRSCC) framework. The MRSCC framework is an adaptation of a previous campus climate framework proposed by Mayhew and associates (2014) to measure the religious and spiritual climate, with an added fifth component to account for the organizational/structural dimension of the campus climate. The five dimensions of the framework are 1) the historical legacy of religious affiliation, 2) the compositional diversity of the campus, 3) the way students psychologically perceive the campus climate, 4) the behavioral activities of students around religious diversity, and 5) the organizational and structural dimension of the campus climate (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303).

The novel fifth dimension of the framework, which was inspired by Milem et al. (2005), focuses on “the extent to which the organizational and structural aspects of an institution facilitate or support religious and spiritual diversity” (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303). As defined by Cole et al. (2020), these organizational and structural aspects include campus policies for students that encompass any enacted student religious accommodation policy (p. 303). While the MRSCC was written with a focus on Muslim students, it is key that Dimension 5 of MRSCC predicts that when a higher education institution's organizational and structural features promote

a positive religious and spiritual climate, Muslim students will have fewer experiences with insensitive peers on campus, experience less coercion to reconsider their RSSI, and generally experience fewer negative interactions with others who have different religious, faith-based, and spiritual traditions on campus (Cole et al., 2020). This study sought to extend this prediction to a wider population: non-Christian students as a whole, as opposed to just Muslim students. The reason for this was a prediction that all non-Christian students likely have some experience with Christian hegemony by way of organizational and structural components in their institutions, which affects their experiences and perceptions of their campuses in a similar way as has been documented among Muslim students.

The primary research question and choice of variables for quantitative analysis in this study reflect the MRSCC framework. The quality and presence of a religious accommodation policy were used in this study as a quantified reflection of “an institution’s organizational and structural aspects” (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303), promoting a positive, pluralistic, and spiritual climate. Likewise, other independent variables were accounted for in all models, including the total number of RSSI and interfaith diversity-focused policies and practices, to represent other aspects of organizational structures. Therefore, this study operated under the assumption that non-Christian student perceptions of welcome and institutional space and support for their spiritual expressions should echo the predictions from Cole and associates’ framework, which tests the framework’s applicability to non-Christians that are not Muslim (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303). Additionally, Dimension 1 of the MRSCC predicts that “religious or faith-based institutions are likely to have a differential influence when compared to secular institutions” (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303). This prediction informed one of this study’s central research questions, which is focused on identifying patterns in institutional characteristics (including

religious affiliation) of campuses with particularly high perceptions of campus welcome and support among non-Christian students.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has covered current literature on a variety of connected topics: the experiences of religiously minoritized college students, the phenomena of Christian hegemony, the state of student religious accommodations at universities, and how different institution types might impact the experiences of non-Christian students. The present study addresses several gaps in the literature: it has a far more expansive sample size than any previous study of religious accommodation policies and will be the first to directly connect the quality of these policies to student perceptions of their institutions. Additionally, this chapter covered the theoretical framework of the study, including the inquiry worldview and the two key substantive content theories that inform this work.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will discuss the methodology of the study. It will begin by covering the mixed-methods design implemented in this research and will continue with a summary of the data collection procedure. The various instruments and variables used throughout the three phases of the study are discussed at length, followed by a sequential overview of the data analysis procedures by phase. The chapter concludes with sections on validity, ethical considerations, and a statement on researcher positionality. As described in Chapter 1, the following research questions guide the study:

1. How does the presence and/or quality of a higher education institution's student religious accommodation policy predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?
2. What, if any, patterns exist in the institutional characteristics and student religious accommodation policy texts at institutions where non-Christian students perceive the most welcoming and supportive environments for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?

### **Mixed Methods**

This study operated with a succinct definition of mixed methods research attributed to John Creswell, which identified it as “a research design...in which the researcher collects, analyzes, and mixes (integrates or connects) both qualitative and quantitative data” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 119). I employed three distinct research methods, which were “mixed” throughout the study: directed content analysis, multilevel regression analysis, and document analysis.

While this study strayed from some norms of mixed methods research, it did not drift from the core essences of the methodology. For instance, the three-phase sequential design used

in this study is unconventional in that it hybridizes two conventional forms of traditional mixed methods designs: the sequential explanatory and the sequential exploratory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). However, the design maintains a focus on the integration of qualitative and quantitative data throughout the three phases, as will be discussed in the subsequent section on the study's research design. This flexibility in the hybridization of methodological design is justified by the pragmatic paradigm of this study, which places the opportunity for knowledge production over the maintenance of methodological norms (Christ, 2007). While the design is outside of the norms of the method, it contributes to the study at hand.

The rationale for utilizing mixed methods for this study was rooted in the nature of the data being examined: analysis of the content of religious accommodation policies was a qualitative task, whereas the large-scale data on student perceptions was quantitative. In order to analyze the relationship between these data, content analysis was embedded in the design to effectively translate the qualitative data into a quantitative form. The ultimate use of document analysis is practical, as the goal of this study was to provide guidance to practitioners, and the rich descriptive data from that analysis were more likely to identify emergent themes.

The integration of the different forms of data—which is an essential defining element of mixed methods research—occurred throughout the three phases by design (Bryman, 2007). Phase 1 created variables for Phase 2, thereby assuring that they were inextricably linked and could not be conducted separately, as the output of Phase 1 was a necessary element of the design of Phase 2. Phase 2 and Phase 3 were similarly linked in that the case study of Phase 3 is bounded by the highest scores on the dependent variables for Phase 2, so it could not be conducted without the context of the preceding data. The findings of the study also further blend the phases by comparing the results of Phase 1 and Phase 3 as a validity test through

methodological triangulation, using different methodological approaches for the same data to compare the results. Moreover, using the rich data of Phase 3 to provide context for the findings of Phase 2 also contributed to the mixing of the study phases.

### **Research Design**

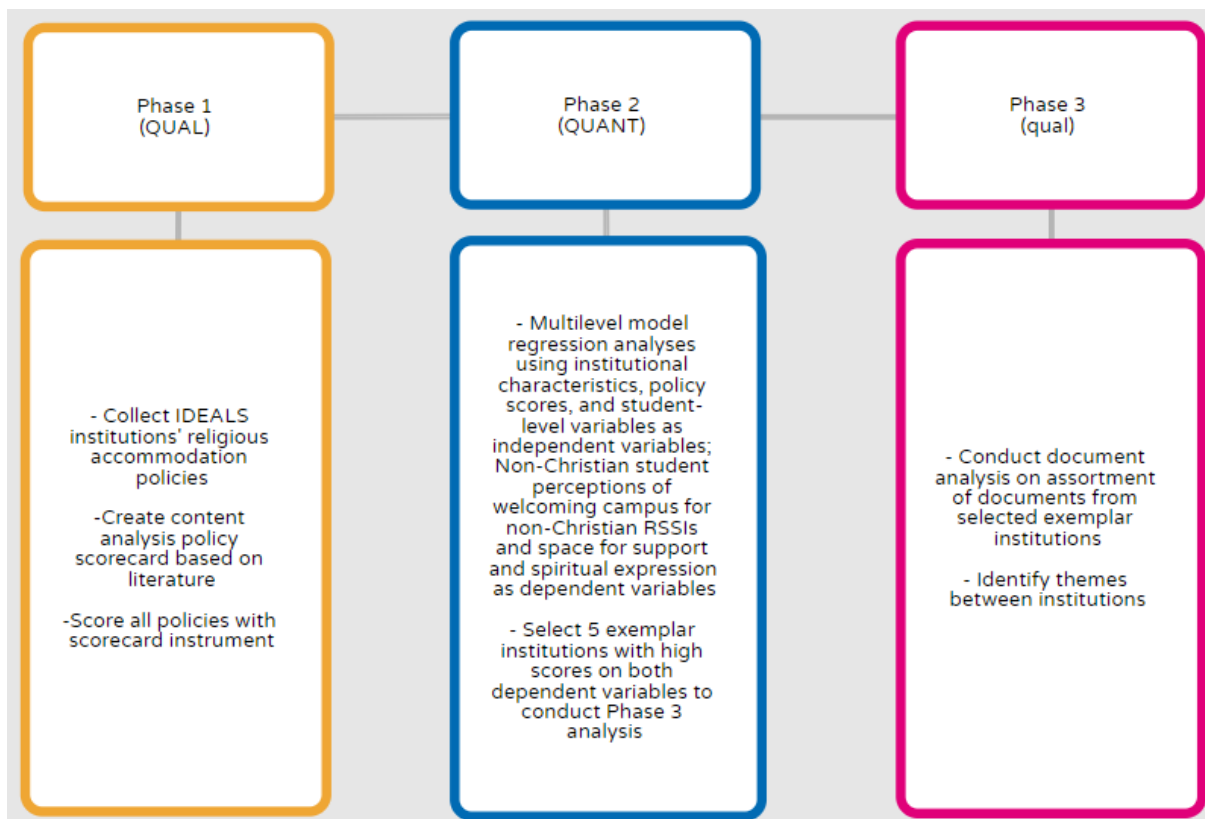
As mentioned in the previous section, this mixed methods study followed a sequential design, though modified from the form presented by Creswell et al. (2003), to account for three phases rather than the typical two phases. This multiphase design was implemented to allow for a third phase of analysis in which a qualitative case study was conducted using quantitative findings—specifically the dependent variable scores by institution—from the second phase to bound the cases. The addition of the third stage hybridized the sequential exploratory and sequential explanatory mixed methods designs into an iterative, recursive design. Each phase was entirely completed in order, with each preceding phase feeding into the following one, making the study both exploratory and explanatory in focus (Christ, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018). The relationship between the qualitative Phase 1 and quantitative Phase 2 was in line with a sequential exploratory design, with the quantitative work following in sequence after a qualitative phase of research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018). In contrast, the relationship between the quantitative Phase 2 and qualitative Phase 3 was modeled on a sequential explanatory design, with the qualitative work contextualizing the findings of a quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018). The two qualitative stages—Phase 1 and Phase 3—additionally function in tandem as methodological triangulation through the utilization of multiple, distinct qualitative methods to analyze the same data (Miles et al., 2014). This hybridization of the methodological design was justified by the pragmatic theoretical worldview



of this study, which places the opportunity for knowledge production over the maintenance of methodological norms (Christ, 2007). Figure 1 provides an overview of the three-phase design and what each stage will consist of.

**Figure 1**

*Three Phase Sequential Research Design with Summaries of Stages*



The mixed methods design for this study was justified due to the nature of the data involved in answering the study's central research questions. A solely quantitative or qualitative study would not adequately connect non-Christian students' perceptions of institutional space and support for their spiritual expression or welcoming to the quality of religious accommodation policies. Without the inclusion of a qualitative element, the quality of a policy could not be assessed, for instance. Likewise, without a quantitative element, these data could not be meaningfully compared. The mixing of existing quantitative data with newly generated

variables via content analysis added value to the mixed methods design of this study, as it provided unique elements and a new degree of context to the existing data. Additionally, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a combination of analyses, integrating both rich descriptions and statistical analysis, which were more effective in tandem for the purpose of ultimately informing institutional practice and compelling improvements.

The first phase of the study was centered on qualitative content analysis. Based on the themes and patterns in the prior literature on what elements constitute high- or low-quality student religious accommodation policies, an instrument was developed to analyze and quantify the quality of religious accommodation policies. Each of the sampled policies was individually scored with this instrument, and the quantitative output was included as an independent variable in the second, quantitative stage of the study. Additionally, a simplified binary score was produced to indicate whether a given institution had a publicly accessible religious accommodation policy or not, which was also utilized in Phase 2 of the study. This first phase was reflected in the first research question, which specifies the need to determine “the presence and quality of a higher education institution’s student religious accommodation policy” for each institution in the sample.

The second stage of the study employed quantitative regression analysis utilizing multi-level modeling. The exploratory models utilized the scores produced from the content analysis of the first stage as independent variables. The dependent variables for the models were the summed measures of student perceptions of institutional space and support for their spiritual expressions and student perceptions of a welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, which were both collected as part of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Study (IDEALS). Both of these dependent variables are student level, making students the unit

of analysis. Notably, given the focus of this study on the effects of religious accommodation policies on non-Christian students, only the responses of students who reported non-Christian RSSIs were included in the data. Additional effect-coded independent variables included in the models center on institutional (public/private status, institutional religious affiliations, urbanicity, region) and student characteristics (gender, first-generation status, international status, sexual orientation, RSSI, and race), necessitating the use of multilevel modeling. The second phase of the study is reflected in the first research question, specifically, whether religious accommodation policies can “predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their religious, secular, and spiritual identities.”

The third phase of the study had an explanatory focus and used scores from the dependent variables from Phase 2 to identify exemplar institutions based on non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression and campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs. The religious accommodation policies, institutional characteristics, and other relevant documents of each of the five highest-scoring institutions were analyzed for common patterns and emergent themes as a collective case study. This final phase is reflected in the second research question, which specifies a focus on identifying “patterns...in the institutional characteristics and student religious accommodation policy texts” at institutions with higher non-Christian student perceptions of support and welcome.

Following the completion of all phases of analysis, the findings were interpreted in concert with each other. The rich descriptions of the third phase provided context and explanation to the quantitative findings of the second phase; the scores of the first phase were interrogated through their relationship with the findings of the second phase’s regression

analyses; and the themes used for Phase 1's scorecard development were compared with the emergent themes from phase three's exemplary cases.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

The institutional sample for this study was based on the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), which was administered between 2015 and 2019 to undergraduate students attending one of 122 institutions diversified by way of type, selectivity, Carnegie Classification, size, and geography (Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Study, 2015; Mayhew et al., 2020). The same students were surveyed using IDEALS at three different time points: at the beginning and end of their first year in college in 2015 and again at the end of their fourth year in 2019. Variables for this study are primarily from data collected at the third time point in 2019, with the exception of the institutional characteristics of region, urbanicity, and affiliation and the student demographic characteristics of race, first-generation status, and international status, which were all collected at the first time point in 2015. These selected variables were pulled from time 1 because they were only collected at the first time point, and are considered inflexible variables. For instance, an institution is not going to change its geographic region over the course of four years, and a first-generation student is not capable of changing whether they are the first in their family to attend college. Detailed descriptions of the sample by institution and student characteristics are located in the subsequent sample description section of the chapter.

The IDEALS institutional selection was mirrored for the collection of institutional student religious accommodation policies for this study. This assured that, for the sake of analysis, only institutions with IDEALS data would be included and also served to mimic an already diversified sample of institutions.

I located religious accommodation policy documents for each of the 122 IDEALS institutions (if possible) using both the Google search engine and respective university website search engines with the following terms: “[school name] religious accommodation,” “[school name] holiday accommodation,” and “[school name] classroom absence.” In cases where no immediate results were found with these search terms using either search engine, student handbooks and institutional policy databases were searched for applicable policy statements where they were publicly available. Typically, if a policy existed, Google was the most consistently reliable way to locate it, as the university websites were generally cumbersome and rarely yielded findings that Google was not able to provide. Finally, if policies were not located at this point, I made an effort to contact the institution’s student affairs or equivalent office for assistance in locating a policy. In one case, a staff member reached back out to me to provide a policy document that was behind an institutional login—the only such policy that obviously existed (it was linked to on the university website) —but it was not available to public view. In cases where no policy was ultimately found through any avenues, the institution received a “zero” score on the first phase scorecard but was not dropped from subsequent analysis. This allowed me to assess whether the presence or absence of a religious accommodation policy was associated with higher or lower non-Christian student perceptions of institutional support and welcome. One exception to this was an institution that closed prior to the final IDEALS survey, which had to be excluded from the Phase 2 and Phase 3 analysis due to the lack of data. Similarly, another nine institutions had to be excluded from the final two phases due to the lack of non-Christian survey respondents. For Phase 3, institutions with fewer than 15 respondents or no religious accommodation policy were removed from the pool of potential institutions to be analyzed, leaving 42 eligible institutions. Having fewer than 15 respondents made mean scores

of student perceptions unreliable for determining the selection parameters, and the presence of a policy was necessary to compare identified themes to the institution's policy, as analyzed in Phase 1. Beyond their religious accommodation policies, additional documents for the selected Phase 3 institutions were collected through the use of both the Google search engine and each institution's official website. Search terms included "[school name] religious life," "[school name] religion," "[school name] interfaith," "[school name] spirituality," "[school name] history," and "[school name] founding." The results for these searches included detailed institutional histories, news articles about staff members and research centers, web pages for religious life offices, sections of the curriculum detailing the courses and programs for religion-related departments, and promotional materials for interfaith-themed service events and lectures, among other miscellaneous web pages describing various forms of campus programming.

The data from IDEALS used in Phase 2 of the study were cleaned to only reflect the responses of non-Christian students prior to any analysis. For the purposes of this study, "Christian" was defined as inclusive of potentially debatable groups like Quakers, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses and exclusive of individuals who were only socialized as Christian (current atheists, agnostics, and converts to other religious or spiritual affiliations)—the latter out of necessity due to the lack of individual data on religious socialization. Quakers, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses were all included in the Christian umbrella for this study because many of their norms are in line with those of Christian hegemony, and while they may require religious accommodations in some cases, their perspectives are almost certainly less discordant with hegemonic Christian Protestantism than non-Christian perspectives would be. Notably, this is not a claim that groups like Jehovah's Witnesses are not marginalized but merely that they are not specifically as marginalized as a direct result of Christian hegemony when compared to non-

Christian groups, which is a central focus of this analysis. As described by Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012), there are levels to the experience and benefits of Christian hegemony and privileges. For the purpose of this study, which strongly centers on the idea of non-Christian students experiencing the power dynamics of Christian hegemony as members of non-dominant groups, the sample needs to have as little benefit from Christian hegemony as possible. In order to remove Christians from the sample used in the analysis, any individuals who demographically identified themselves as “Christian” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, or Roman Catholic), an affiliation under “Another Worldview” that is historically or tangentially tied to Christianity (Quaker, Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh-day Adventist, Christian Scientist), or partially identified as Christian (such as “Catholic Muslim” or “Christian Buddhist”) were removed from the sample.

## **Sample Description**

### ***Phase 1***

Phase 1 included a sample of 121 institutions. One institution was dropped from the total IDEALS sample of 122 because it closed prior to the final data collection and did not have data to analyze. Of the 121 sampled institutions, 14 were Catholic, 15 were Evangelical, 29 were mainline Protestant, 31 were nonsectarian private colleges, and 32 were public. The number of Christian-affiliated institutions—an amalgamation of Catholic, Evangelical, and Protestant colleges—was 58, and the count of secular institutions—public and private-nonsectarian colleges—was 63. By urbanicity, the sample incorporates 61 institutions located in cities, nine institutions located in rural areas, 19 within towns, and 32 within the boundaries of suburbs. By region, the sample includes 30 from the Southeast (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV), six from the Southwest (AZ, NM, OK, TX), five from the Rocky Mountain region

(CO, ID, MT, UT, WY), 14 from the Plains (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD), eight from the Far West (AK, CA, HI, NV, OR, WA), 25 from the Mid-East (DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, PA), six from New England (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT), 26 from the Great Lakes (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI), and one from an outlying area (AS, FM, GU, MH, MP, PR, PW, VI).

## ***Phase 2***

Following the removal of Christian respondents, the total sample for Phase 2 was 2,892 non-Christian students. The sample included 629 (21.7%) first-generation students and 2,263 (78.3%) continuing generation students. International students made up 150 (5.2%) of the 2,892 students in the sample. Table 1 contains a count of the race identification of the sample, Table 2 presents the breakdown of sexual orientation, Table 3 covers gender identity, and Table 4 covers RSSI. Descriptions of the institution-level characteristics associated with each student follow, with Table 5 covering institution type, Table 6 providing the sample breakdown by region, and Table 7 describing urbanicity.

**Table 1**

*Student Sample Description by Race*

Race	Total	%
African American/Black	82	2.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	609	21.1
Latino	157	5.4
Native American	3	0.1
White	1697	58.7
Other Race	44	1.5
Multiracial	295	10.2
Not Reported	5	0.2



**Table 2***Student Sample Description by Sexual Orientation*

Sexual Orientation	Total	%
Bisexual	431	14.9
Gay	84	2.9
Heterosexual	1970	68.1
Lesbian	67	2.3
Queer	127	4.4
Another sexual orientation	110	3.8
Prefer not to respond	97	3.4
Not Reported	6	0.2

**Table 3***Student Sample Description by Gender Identity*

Gender Identity	Total	%
Cisgender woman	1896	65.6
Cisgender man	883	30.5
Non-binary/genderqueer	39	1.3
Trans woman	5	0.2
Trans man	13	0.4
Trans & Non-binary/genderqueer	40	1.4
Gender not specified	6	0.2
Prefer not to respond	10	0.3

**Table 4***Student Sample Description by RSSI*

RSSI	Total	%
Agnosticism	857	29.6
Atheism	596	20.6
Bahai Faith	6	0.2
Buddhism	80	2.8
Confucianism	4	0.1
Daoism	3	0.1
Hinduism	79	2.7
Islam	109	3.8
Jainism	3	0.1
Judaism	167	5.8

**Table 4** (continued).

Native American Tradition	2	0.0
Non-religious	399	13.8
None	143	4.9
Paganism	22	0.8
Secular Humanism	15	0.5
Sikhism	16	0.6
Spiritual	223	7.7
Unitarian Universalism	25	0.9
Zoroastrianism	1	0.0
Another Worldview	39	1.3
Not Reported	103	3.6

**Table 5***Student Sample Description by Institution Type*

Institution Type	Total	%
Catholic	216	7.5
Evangelical	55	1.9
Protestant	506	17.5
Private – Nonsectarian	857	29.6
Public	1258	43.5

**Table 6***Student Sample Description by Region*

Region	Total	%
Far West	502	17.4
Great Lakes	631	21.8
Mid-East	621	21.5
New England	193	6.7
Outlying Areas	2	0.0
Plains	154	5.3
Rocky Mountains	150	5.2
Southeast	533	18.4
Southwest	106	3.7

**Table 7***Student Sample Description by Urbanicity*

Urbanicity	Total	%
City (Large)	1047	36.2
City (Midsize)	266	9.2
City (Small)	544	18.8
Rural (Distant)	8	0.3
Rural (Fringe)	37	1.3
Suburb (Large)	528	18.3
Suburb (Midsize)	98	3.4
Suburb (Small)	54	1.9
Town (Distant)	167	5.8
Town (Fringe)	32	1.1
Town (Remote)	111	3.8

For the Phase 2 analysis, the RSSI responses were collapsed into fewer categories—as represented in the RSSI variable in Table 5—rather than the full count of reported RSSIs in Table 8. For instance, Secular Humanists, Agnostics, and the Non-religious were combined into the category “Another Nonreligious RSSI,” just as many of the minority RSSIs in the sample (Bahai, Confucians, Jains, Pagans, Daoists, Sikhs, Native American traditional adherents, Zoroastrians, and Unitarian Universalists) were combined into the ‘Another Minority RSSI’ category.

The sample for Phase 2 has some notable demographic qualities. First, the sum of the various nonreligious RSSIs—atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, the nonreligious, and those who indicated “none”—made up nearly 70% of the sample. As noted in the literature review, students in this category are less likely to need to use a religious accommodation policy compared to other marginalized RSSIs. Furthermore, because the surveyed students were not asked about their religious socialization, it is likely that many within the nonreligious categories were raised as Christians and may benefit from Christian hegemony in more ways than students

from other marginalized RSSIs that were not raised with Christian norms. The sample additionally overrepresents students attending city-based colleges (64.2%) in terms of urbanicity, and public colleges (43.5%) in terms of institution type. Only 55 students in the sample attended Evangelical colleges—less than 2% of the total sample—which is almost certainly a byproduct of removing Christians from the data in the cleaning process. In student demographic terms, the sample was notably majority White (58.7%), with a very small proportion of African American/Black respondents (2.8%). This may be partially connected to the proportion of the sample coming from the nonreligious RSSI categories, which have been documented to be largely White (Snipes & Maples, 2020). In terms of gender, the sample was roughly 96% cisgender, with 3% of sampled students identifying as either trans, nonbinary, or genderqueer. Women were overrepresented with a total of just under 66% of the sampled population. The sample was more diverse in terms of sexual orientation than the general population, with only 68.1% of students reporting heterosexuality as their orientation, compared with orientations outside of heterosexuality making up 28.3% of the sample, and 3.6% of students choosing not to respond with a specific orientation. This diversity in sexual orientation could also be in part a reflection of the large nonreligious proportion of the sample, as the nonreligious umbrella as a demographic have been documented to have a higher rate of LGBT-identification than the general population (Schwadel & Sandstrom, 2019).

For the policy presence measure, 2,173 (75.1%) students in the sample attended institutions that had a present policy and 719 (24.9%) attended institutions without a policy. The breakdown in terms of specific policy score from the Phase 1 scorecard is provided in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Number of Students in Sample by Institutional Religious Accommodation Policy Scorecard Scores*

Score	Students	%
0	719	24.9
1	0	0
2	44	1.5
3	319	11.0
4	476	16.5
5	771	26.7
6	249	8.6
7	231	8.0
8	83	2.9
9	0	0
10	0	0
11	0	0

### **Phase 3**

Five institutions that had uniquely high mean scores for both perceptions of institutional welcome for non-Christian RSSIs and perceptions of space for support and spiritual expression were selected. Institutions that had less than 15 student respondents and those that did not have an accommodation policy were excluded from the potential pool of institutions for the Phase 3 analysis. The description of the five selected institutions is provided in Table 9. For the remainder of the manuscript, these institutions will be referred to by a combination of their institution type and region. For example, the first institution is “Public Mideast,” and the second is “Private Southwest.”

**Table 9**

*Description of Institutions Selected for Phase 3 Analysis*

Exemplar	Institution Type	Region	Urbanicity	Policy Score	Space Mean	Welcome Mean
1	Public	Mideast	Suburb (Large)	5	16.77	21.74
2	Private-Nonsectarian	Southwest	City (Large)	3	17.11	22.43
3	Protestant	Southeast	City (Small)	5	16.81	21.48
4	Private-Nonsectarian	Mideast	City (Small)	5	16.76	21.64
5	Private-Nonsectarian	Southeast	Suburb (Midsize)	5	16.87	18.47

For the institutional space and support for spiritual expression variable, the maximum score was 20. Public Mideast scored 16.77, Private Southwest scored 17.11, Protestant Southeast scored 16.81, Private Mideast scored 16.76, and Private Southeast scored 16.87. For the welcoming campus variable, the maximum score was 25. Public Mideast scored 21.74, Private Southwest scored 22.43, Protestant Southeast scored 21.48, Private Mideast scored 21.64, and Private Southeast scored 18.47. The mean score for eligible institution on the institutional support for spiritual expression variable was 16.1, and the mean score for eligible institutions on the welcoming campus variable was 20.6. Private Southwest notably scored the highest on both measures. Private Southeast scored a number of points below the other exemplars on the welcoming campus measure – even below the average for eligible institutions – but had the second-highest score among all eligible institutions for the institutional support measure, justifying its inclusion as an exemplar when compared with both scores for other eligible institutions.

## **Instruments and Variables**

### ***Phase 1***

Phase 1 of the research consisted of a directed content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2004). A scorecard was developed based on the recommendations of prior research, which provided a framework for judging the quality of each student religious accommodation policy. The scorecard was designed in accordance with CRPT's third and fifth tenets: the third emphasizes the need to expose Christian hegemony and privilege in society, and the fifth states the need to integrate considerations of marginalization, power, and privilege in relation to RSSIs into higher education research and the analysis of higher education policies. The scorecard specifically highlights manifestations of Christian hegemony by design, and the items on the scorecard take

into consideration RSSI power dynamics in society. The scorecard was composed of a priori coding categories in the form of questions with binary (yes/no) answers. These questions were developed based on the recommendations of prior studies and were used to examine and code each collected student religious accommodation policy. Cases where an institution did not have a publicly evident student religious accommodation policy were given a score of 0. Institutions that did have relevant policies were granted a minimum score of 1, as the first question on the scorecard is whether the institution has a visible policy. This measure was used as a binary variable in order to simply indicate the presence or absence of a student religious accommodation policy for select regression models in the second phase of the study.

Beyond the minimum of 1 point for the existence of a policy, institutions received a point for each a priori code from the scorecard that was reflected in their policy, with the exception of Item 6, which had a weight of 2. For instance, if the scorecard item “Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy...?” was answered “yes” based on the content of the religious accommodation policy, then a point was added to the scorecard for the institution.

Prior studies on religious accommodation policies—which were included in the literature review and were utilized to develop the content analysis scorecard for Phase 1—were initially found using Google Scholar, searching for the phrases “student religious accommodation college,” “student religious accommodation law,” and “student religious accommodation policy.” Later, the reference lists in the initially collected sources were examined for further relevant literature.

The scorecard consists of ten items. Item 1 is “Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?” This is based on the principle that the absence of a religious accommodation policy is itself a manifestation of Christian hegemony via

institutional neglect for the needs of students from marginalized religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds (Blumenfeld, 2006). Additionally, the presence of a religious accommodation policy is a reflection of the organizational and structural dimension of the campus climate as outlined in the fifth dimension of the MRSCC, and should be predictive of more positive non-Christian campus climate perceptions (Cole et al., 2020). Item 2 is “Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?” This is based on the finding by Maples et al. (2021) that only 72% of analyzed policies outlined an avenue for recourse in the case that a student encountered resistance or denial for their sought accommodation (p. 282).

Item 3 is “Does the policy identify a committee or staff member who is responsible for arranging religious accommodation requests?” This is based on the past finding that students perceive having to directly approach a professor or authority for an accommodation request as “psychologically intimidating” (Reed, 1998, p. 18). Similarly, Maples et al. (2021) highlighted an exemplary policy that designated a standing committee to be responsible for arranging all religious accommodation requests at the institution.

Item 4 asks, “Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?” while item 5 asks, “Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?” Both of these items are based on the recommendation of Blumenfeld (2006), who stated that Christian hegemony is embodied in education institutions through:

Requir[ing] students...who do not follow Christian practices to justify, verify, document, and in other ways ‘prove’ to those in authority that they...are entitled to accommodations, whether they involve the wearing of religious symbols or garments,



attending certain spaces during designated times, being absent from classes to observe religious/spiritual events or services...In effect, the authorities have power to either agree to or deny these requests for accommodation based on their limited or narrow understanding of the practices of other faith communities, as well as their attitudes toward these communities. (p. 205)

Maples et al. (2021) found that 33% of analyzed student religious accommodation policies required students to in some way justify the sincerity or validity of their beliefs, which could include providing official signed documentation or access to a religious authority figure in order to be considered for accommodation.

Item 6 asks, “Does the policy apply to needed religious accommodations outside of the classroom setting (dietary accommodations, prayer space needs, etc.)?” Maples et al. (2021) found that only 25% of analyzed policies mentioned religious accommodation beyond excused class absences for holiday observance, meaning that student religious needs related to diet, prayer, fasting, and so forth are routinely neglected from the institutional perspective. Because of the importance of prayer space accommodations emphasized by Mubarak (2007), the need for outside-of-class accommodations emphasized by participants in Reed (1998), and the fact that considering other practice needs outside of holidays requires conscious consideration of practices outside of mainstream Christian norms, Item 6 is weighted with a score of 2 instead of 1. The normative Christian hegemonic perspective includes holidays like Christmas and Easter but does not typically include dietary restrictions, prayer space needs, or other potential practice needs. Therefore, including these considerations in an accommodation policy represents exceptional attention to non-Christian needs, rather than just viewing minoritized RSSIs with a Christian-centric lens, thus justifying the weight.

Item 7 is “Does the policy allow a student to submit a religious accommodation request without having to directly declare their religious, secular, or spiritual identity to an authority figure?” According to a 2014 study, the majority of faculty members in higher education identify with Christian denominations, adding an additional layer of power dynamics to their role of professor over students (Lindholm, 2014, p. 125). Given that a student seeking an accommodation is likely from a marginalized religious, secular, or spiritual affiliation, being forced into a position where they have to directly disclose details of their beliefs to a likely Christian authority figure in order to be accommodated would be less than ideal, particularly if the student is from a stigmatized RSSI group like Pagans or Satanists.

Item 8 is “Is a specific office or department identified as being responsible for overseeing the student religious accommodation policy?” One of the key recommendations from Maples et al. (2021) is for student religious accommodation policies to clarify which office or offices are in charge of the policy within the policy text itself so that they know who to reach out to for guidance and questions.

Item 9 states, “Does the policy acknowledge Christian privilege, note the existence of power dynamics between religious traditions, or acknowledge the importance of religious diversity for the institution?” This is based on a number of recommendations from Maples et al. (2021), including a note that policy language “should be framed with introductory text that centers students and is intentionally pluralistic” (p. 286) and that power dynamics “among majority, minority, and non-religious identities” (p. 285) need to be recognized, most notably Christian hegemony. If a policy contains any one of these elements, it will receive a point for Item 9, as any of these qualities are indicative of an awareness of religious and spiritual dynamics on the part of the institution.

Lastly, Item 10 states, “Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: ‘undue hardship,’ ‘sincerely held,’ and ‘reasonable accommodation?’” As stated by Maples et al. (2021):

These phrases imply that students’ RSS beliefs and practices were subservient to the institution’s needs or that institutions may have legitimately questioned the necessity of expression of students’ beliefs and practices...these phrases...potentially [leave] students to wonder what might [make] an accommodation “reasonable” or an “undue hardship” for their institution. (p. 284)

If any of the specified phrases are present, the policy did not receive a point for Item 10. The phrase “sincerely held” has been used to justify the inequitable interrogation of non-Christian students regarding the validity of their beliefs and practices in order to qualify for accommodations (Blumenfeld, 2006; Reed, 1998; Small, 2020), and both “undue hardship” and “reasonable” are deliberately loosely defined legal phrases that can allow the denial of accommodation requests with minimal justification (Reed, 1998). Maples et al. (2021) found that 50% of their sampled policies used “undue hardship,” 30.5% used “reasonable accommodation,” and 36% used “sincerely held” (p. 284).

After each of the sampled policies was individually assessed with the scorecard instrument, the quantitative output (the scores) of the content analysis phase were included as an independent variable in the second, quantitative stage of the study. Additionally, a simplified binary score was produced for each institution to indicate whether each had a publicly accessible religious accommodation policy or not, which was then utilized in select regression models in Phase 2 of the study.

## *Phase 2*

For the second phase of the study, four multilevel regression models assessed the relationship between key independent variables and two dependent measures: non-Christian student perceptions of welcome and perceptions of support. The dependent variables for the models included measures of perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression and perceived campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs collected from fourth-year students surveyed as part of IDEALS. These variables sum multiple items from IDEALS, which each used a 5-point scale to measure the extent to which students agreed with given statements based on their perceptions or experiences while enrolled in college/university, on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). The four IDEALS items summed for the development of the perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression dependent variable are included in Table 10 below. The five IDEALS item summed for the perceived campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs dependent variable is shown in Table 11. The Cronbach's Alpha scale reliability coefficients for the institutional space and support for spiritual expression variable was 0.7957, and the welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs variable was 0.8729.

**Table 10**

*Items and Statistics for Dependent Variable, Institutional Support for Spiritual Expression*

Item	Mean	SD
This campus is a safe place for me to express my worldview	4.07	0.91
Faculty and staff on my campus accommodate my needs with regard to celebrating holidays and other important observances connected to my religious or non-religious worldview	3.79	0.96
There is a place on this campus where I can express my personal worldview	4.09	0.92

**Table 10** (continued).

My classes are safe places for me to express my worldview	3.95	1.00
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*Note.* All items used the following five-point response scale: 1 = disagree strongly; 2 = disagree somewhat; 3 = neither agree not disagree; 4 = agree somewhat; 5 = agree strongly

**Table 11**

*Items and Statistics for Dependent Variable, Welcoming Campus for Non-Christian RSSIs*

Item	Mean	SD
This campus is a welcoming place for Atheists	4.16	0.97
This campus is a welcoming place for Buddhists	3.88	0.93
This campus is a welcoming place for Hindus	3.83	0.96
This campus is a welcoming place for Jews	4.01	0.94
This campus is a welcoming place for Muslims	3.63	1.09

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*Note.* All items used the following five-point response scale: 1 = disagree strongly; 2 = disagree somewhat; 3 = neither agree not disagree; 4 = agree somewhat; 5 = agree strongly

The central independent variables of interest were derived from Phase 1: the binary score indicating the presence/absence of a policy was used for two models, and the more detailed score to reflect the quality of a policy was used in the other two models. A number of institution-level variables with theoretical and/or empirical relationships with students' perceptions of campus climate were included in all models. Each institution was assigned a region using a schema from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. Additionally, each institution was assigned with a measure of institution type that integrated both religious affiliation and public/private status

(public, catholic, private-nonsectarian, protestant, evangelical). Institutions were also given an Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) measure of urbanicity (an 11-point scale including variations of city, town, suburb, rural) based on the recommendation of Mutakabbir and Nuriddin (2016) that the spiritual well-being of religiously minoritized students is impacted by the urbanicity of their institutions. Additionally, summed variables representing the number of institutional religious/spiritual diversity trainings, policies, programs, curricular opportunities, spiritual spaces, and student involvement opportunities provided at each institution were incorporated into each model (Cole et al., 2020). The specific compositions of these four summed variables are detailed in Table 12. Each of the institution-level variables and their coding schema are located in Table 13.

**Table 12**

*IDEALS Items Summed for Continuous Independent Variables*

Variable: Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith spaces provided on campus	
Item	Scheme
Multifaith or spiritual life center	0=No 1=Yes
Ritual washing stations	0=No 1=Yes
Prayer space	0=No 1=Yes
Designated meditation space	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith worship spaces on campus	0=No 1=Yes
Separate worship spaces for different faiths on campus	0=No 1=Yes

**Table 12** (continued).

Full-time religious life staff employed by the institution	0=No 1=Yes
Part-time religious life staff employed by the institution	0=No 1=Yes
Religious life staff employed by their respective organizations	0=No 1=Yes
Other support and space opportunities provided	0=No 1=Yes
<hr/>	
Variable: Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith programs provided on campus	
<hr/> Item	<hr/> Scheme
Student/campus religious and secular student organizations	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith action student group	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith community service opportunities	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith internships	0=No 1=Yes
Student interfaith council	0=No 1=Yes
Other interfaith student leadership opportunities	0=No 1=Yes
Religious diversity/interfaith cooperation included in required student events	0=No 1=Yes
Other involvement opportunities	0=No 1=Yes
<hr/>	
Variable: Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith diversity policies	
<hr/> Item	<hr/> Scheme
Institutional policies related to religious diversity	0=No 1=Yes

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**Table 12** (continued).

Institutional policies related to accommodations for religious holidays	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith cooperation and/or religious diversity indicated in the institutional mission statement	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith cooperation and/or religious diversity indicated in the institutional diversity statement	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith cooperation and/or religious diversity indicated in the institution's strategic plan	0=No 1=Yes
Cross-campus interfaith cooperation committee including faculty, staff, and administration	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith or religion subgroup of institutional diversity committee	0=No 1=Yes
Required religious diversity training for faculty	0=No 1=Yes
Optional religious diversity training for faculty	0=No 1=Yes
Required religious diversity training for staff	0=No 1=Yes
Optional religious diversity training for staff	0=No 1=Yes
Required religious diversity training for student professional staff	0=No 1=Yes
Optional religious diversity training for student professional staff	0=No 1=Yes
Presidential/administrative statements or communications about the importance of engaging religious diversity	0=No 1=Yes
Program-specific evaluation of interfaith initiatives	0=No 1=Yes

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**Table 12** (continued).

Campus partnerships with local religious/nonreligious communities	0=No 1=Yes
Other campus diversity and policy opportunities	0=No 1=Yes
<hr/>	
Variable: Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith curricular opportunities provided on campus	
<hr/>	
Item	Scheme
Religious studies department	0=No 1=Yes
Religious studies minor	0=No 1=Yes
Religious studies major	0=No 1=Yes
Required religion course for undergraduates	0=No 1=Yes
Required religious diversity course for undergraduates	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith concentration or minor for undergraduates	0=No 1=Yes
Interfaith cooperation integrated into required/general education courses	0=No 1=Yes
Specific interfaith courses	0=No 1=Yes
Other curricular opportunities provided	0=No 1=Yes
<hr/>	

**Table 13***IDEALS Institution-level Independent Variables*

Variables	Coding Scheme
Institution type*	Catholic Evangelical Protestant Private-Nonsectarian Public
Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith spaces provided on campus	0-10
Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith programs provided on campus	0-8
Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith diversity policies provided	0-17
Total number of religious, spiritual, or interfaith curricular opportunities provided	0-9
Region*	Far West (AK CA HI NV OR WA) Great Lakes (IL IN MI OH WI) Mid East (DE DC MD NJ NY PA) New England (CT ME MA NH RI VT) Outlying areas (AS FM GU MH MP PR PW VI) Plains (IA KS MN MO NE ND SD) Rocky Mountains (CO ID MT UT WY) Southeast (AL AR FL GA KY LA MS NC SC TN VA WV) Southwest (AZ NM OK TX)

**Table 13** (continued).

Urbanicity*	City (Large) City (Midsize) City (Small) Rural (Distant) Rural (Fringe) Suburb (Large) Suburb (Midsize) Suburb (Small) Town (Distant) Town (Fringe) Town (Remote)
Religious accommodation policy presence measure	0=No policy 1=Policy present
Religious accommodation policy full score	0-11

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*Note.* ‘\*’ indicates that a variable was effect coded. For these variables, the categories are provided instead of a coding scheme.

The student-level variables in the models included first-generation status, international status, sexual orientation, race, RSSI, and gender, all of which are included in Table 14 with their coding schemes. The inclusion of these student demographic variables was justified by the second tenet of Critical Religious Pluralism Theory, which states that analysis utilizing CRPT should embrace “intersectional analysis of religious identity with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity” (Small, 2020, p. 63). Categorical independent variables, including RSSI, race, sexual orientation, gender, institutional religious affiliation, institution urbanicity, and institution region, were effect-coded, which allowed them to be included in the multilevel regression models. For effect coding, each category option within a categorical variable was given their own version of the variable, with values modified to equal 0 for instances of all other categories, 1 for instances of the stated category, and -1 for instances of a specified omitted category. When all of the effect-coded variables were run together in a model, the results accurately reflected whether each

category was independently a significant predictor of the dependent variable. A second set of effect-coded variables were created in order to report findings for the originally omitted category through running an otherwise-identical separate model with a different -1 coded category.

Both of the dependent variables and all of the continuous independent variables were standardized with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Because of this, the reported unstandardized regression coefficients for these predictors were analogous to standardized coefficients, and coefficients for the categorical variables could be interpreted as adjusted Cohen's *d*s (Cohen et al., 2003). Converting all continuous variables to *z* scores (standardizing) is equivalent to grand-mean centering, a standard practice in multilevel modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). However, unstandardized versions of the dependent variables were used in order to select exemplar institutions for the Phase 3 analysis, as the institutional mean scores on each measure were used to determine the sample.

**Table 14**

*IDEALS Student-level Independent Variables*

Variables	Coding Scheme
First-generation status	0=Continuing-generation 1=First-generation
International status	0=Not international student 1=International student
Sexual orientation*	Bisexual Gay Heterosexual Lesbian Queer Another sexual orientation

**Table 14** (continued).

Race*	African American/Black Asian/Pacific Islander Latino Native American White Other Race Multiracial
Religious, secular, or spiritual identity*	Atheism Buddhism Hinduism Judaism Islam Another Minority Worldview Another Nonreligious Worldview Another Worldview
Gender*	Cisgender woman Cisgender man Non-binary/genderqueer Transgender woman Transgender man Transgender & Non-binary/genderqueer A gender not specified

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*Note.* ‘\*’ indicates that a variable was effect coded. For these variables, the categories are provided instead of a coding scheme.

A number of multilevel regression models were used for this study’s analysis. Some models (2 and 4) used the religious accommodation policy presence binary indicator as an independent variable whereas other models (1 and 3) used the full policy scores from Phase 1 as an independent variable. All models used the other listed IDEALS measures—both student level and institution level—as independent variables. The dependent variables for the models are the IDEALS summed measures for perceived institutional support for spiritual expression and perceived campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs from fourth year students—specifically from respondent students who did not identify as Christian. Each model includes one of the two dependent variables and one of the two policy independent variables, making a total of four

primary models. Additionally, effect code models were conducted for each primary model in order to generate findings for each effect-coded variable.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

### ***Phase 1***

The data analysis in Phase 1 focused on the implementation of the directed content analysis scorecard to analyze each selected institution's religious accommodation policy and generate a quantitative score for each. If any institutions did not have an evident religious accommodation policy, their scorecard was tallied as a 0, which was used as data in Phase 2 rather than discarding the institution's scorecard as missing data. This is because the lack of a policy was substantial given the focus of this study, as it was an institution-level reflection of Christian hegemonic neglect of the needs of non-Christians. Outside of Item 6, which was scored with a value of two, each item on the scorecard was worth one point, yielding a maximum score of 11.

### ***Phase 2***

Multilevel models were constructed to examine institution-level variables alongside student-level variables in the prediction of non-Christian student perceptions of welcome and support. Within these models, all students associated with the same institution had the same data for their institution-level variables. However, the student-level dependent and independent variables were unique to each individual student. This allowed for comparison between institutions using student-level data: for instance, the student perceptions of institutional space and support could be compared between different institution types. This multi-level modeling approach was justified by the purpose of this study: students are ultimately the ones who are impacted by religious accommodation policies, so it is important to have dependent variables

that center them as the unit of analysis in order to understand how such policies affect them. At the same time, religious accommodation policies apply to all students at a given institution and understanding the differences in these policies between institutions is an element of this study, which justifies the use of both student-level and institution-level variables.

The hierarchical nature of the data—with students located within institutions—additionally necessitated the use of a multilevel modeling approach. Because hierarchical data violate the independence assumption of ordinary least squares regression, multilevel modeling enabled me to separate the within-institution (Level 1) and between-institution (Level 2) variances and estimate standard errors appropriately (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for the standardized welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs dependent variable was .191, which means that 19.1% of the variance in the campus welcoming measure can be attributed to differences across institutions. The ICC for the institutional space and support for spiritual expression variable was .048, which means 4.8% of the variance within that measure was attributable to institutional differences. Multilevel modeling is generally considered necessary when the ICC is at least 5% (Heck & Thomas, 2009). Though the ICC for the institutional support variable is just below this recommended threshold, LeBreton and Senter (2008) suggest that an ICC of 4.8% is still within the range of a small-to-medium effect. Given this recommendation and the hierarchical structure of the data, multilevel modeling was appropriate for this analysis.

In addition to the two unconditional models used to estimate the aforementioned ICCs, four primary models were constructed. Model 1 used the welcoming campus for the non-Christian RSSIs dependent variable and included all of the institution-level variables (institutional affiliation, number of interfaith spaces on campus, number of interfaith programs

on campus, number of institutional interfaith diversity policies, number of religion-related curricular opportunities, region, and urbanicity), all of the student characteristics (first-generation status, international status, sexual orientation, race, RSSI, gender), and the full policy score variable. Model 2 was identical to Model 1, except with the binary policy variable replacing the full policy score variable. Model 3 was identical to Model 1 with the exception of the dependent variable, which was swapped for the institutional support for spiritual expression variable. Likewise, Model 4 was identical to Model 2, with the change in the dependent variable to the institutional support for spiritual expression measure. Essentially, the models function as two pairs: the first two focus on the welcoming campus dependent variable, and the latter two focus on the institutional support dependent variable. All four models were required to test both the binary policy presence measure and the full policy scorecard measure on each dependent variable, as the two policy variables could not be included in the same models.

Missing data for student-level dependent variables was a notable concern for this phase of the study. Despite its drawbacks in dealing with missing data, listwise deletion was used in part due to the small number of observations that were missing, which is a primary concern with simply dropping missing data due to the loss of explanatory power for the models. For instance, for Models 1 and 2 using the welcoming campus dependent variable, only 21 (0.7%) observations were missing out of the 2,892 students in the total sample. Moreover, for Models 3 and 4 using the space and support for spiritual expression variable, only 15 (0.5%) observations were missing. With so few data points dropped, the statistical power of the models was not significantly impacted by listwise deletion of the missing data.

After conducting all regression analysis models to establish the significance of the relationships between the dependent and independent variables, mean scores were produced for



each institution from the non-standardized measures of perceived institutional support for spiritual expression and the perceived campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs from non-Christian students. These scores were used to identify five exemplar, high-scoring institutions for both measures that have identified religious accommodation policies to analyze in Phase 3 of the study. Notably, institutions also need to have a minimum student respondent number of 15 to assure that the mean scores do not inordinately privilege individual responses.

### *Phase 3*

Following the selection of key exemplar institutions based on the findings of Phase 2, each of their religious accommodation policies were re-examined alongside other publicly available documents and pieces of institutional information, such as their Carnegie classifications, information on their websites about religion and spirituality, and/or their student handbooks. Emergent themes were identified through multiple rounds of inductive coding, with an initial emphasis on in vivo codes to maintain specific words and phrases used in the policy texts. The purpose of this analysis was to identify any evident patterns in the content or form between the selected policies and documents or between the institutions themselves. In contrast to the content analysis of Phase 1, which utilized a directed, a priori approach to coding, the coding for Phase 3 was entirely emergent. Theory and literature did not directly guide the coding process, as codes were developed over the analysis process. However, this analysis maintained a critical perspective toward power dynamics, privilege, and manifestations of Christian hegemony in accordance with the guiding theory of CRPT.

Once all the policies were coded, the thematic findings of Phase 3 were written up, interpreted, and compared with the scorecard developed in Phase 1, as well as with the quantitative findings of Phase 2. The purpose of Phase 3 was to provide context for the findings

of Phase 2, allow for a deeper qualitative exploration of policy texts and institutional characteristics for rich data, and to test how well the scorecard reports from Phase 1 reflected the student perceptions identified in Phase 2. For instance, did the quality of a policy accurately reflect an institution's stated priorities or how students view the support and welcoming of their campuses? An institution could have a minimal policy, but students might still have perceived high support and welcoming for their RSSIs due to other institutional practices and behaviors not reflected by or encapsulated in a policy.

### **Validity and Methodological Integrity**

The validity and methodological integrity of this study were pursued using both previously validated variables: the measures secondarily analyzed from IDEALS and those from the methodological triangulation inherent to the multiple and mixed methods in the study's design. For instance, the scorecard development process for Phase 1 utilized multiple data sources and the results of the Phase 3 exemplar case analyses were compared with the Phase 1 scorecard at the end of the project to analyze the ways in which they were similar and dissimilar.

In order to seek further validity in the data analysis process throughout the multiple phases of the project, I kept a reflective journal throughout the analysis process. In addition, my positionality was acknowledged in a written statement at the outset of the project and revised at the end of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The qualitative elements of this study are all centered on publicly available documents, so no human subjects were involved with the original data collection in this study. Therefore, this study did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The data used in the second phase's quantitative analysis, which was all previously collected by IDEALS, received IRB

approval prior to being collected, and I was given IRB approval to view and use that secondary data.

### **Positionality Statement**

My positionality as the sole researcher on this project is important to acknowledge. First, due to my Christian upbringing and socialization, I have never needed to use a religious accommodation policy. All the holidays that my family observes are already accommodated in the structures and norms of the United States due to the hegemony of Christianity in society. Nonetheless, I currently identify as a secular humanist and atheist, and no longer personally observe Christian holidays. While I do now celebrate solstices and equinoxes, I have never had to request time away from work or school to do so. My interest in this topic largely stems from my experiences working in a religious life office at a higher education institution, where I witnessed instances of students frustrated by the institution's policy for student religious accommodations. However, I have also written and worked in the area of religious, secular, and spiritual diversity within higher education for many years. I have worked for education non-profit organizations and participated in research teams and communities with missions centering on religious, secular, and spiritual diversity, including leading a prior study of student religious accommodation policies. I also served as a research associate for IDEALS, the longitudinal survey from which the quantitative data for this study is borrowed.

Given that the data for this project is either de-identified secondary data or public-facing documents, there is not much to disclose in terms of the researcher-participant relationship for this study. However, I previously worked at Vanderbilt University, which is one of the institutions that was included in IDEALS and is thus one of the institutions selected for this study. However, no data on specific institutions will be revealed publicly as part of this

manuscript beyond a passing acknowledgement of their participation, unless they are provided an ambiguous pseudonym.

Aside from my Christian socialization, I feel that it is important to note my other personal identities, particularly in taking on a critical research perspective. I am white, male, able-bodied, a continuing-generation college student, a United States citizen by birth, a doctoral candidate, and cisgender, and I benefit from the privileges of these identities and statuses. It is likely that my privileges will affect my lens and perspective during data analysis, which is one of the reasons why I am choosing to consciously reflect throughout the analysis process via journaling.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study utilized a multiphase mixed methods design incorporating directed content analysis, multi-level modeled regression analysis, and document analysis to explore the connection between the presence and quality of institutional religious accommodation policies for students and how students perceive their institutions. This chapter outlines the mixed methods approach, provides details on the variables and instruments that were used for the numerous phases of the study, reveals the data analysis process for each stage in succession, and provides sections on validity, ethical considerations, and positionality. The following chapter will delve into the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the findings that address the study's research questions in sequence by phase. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the presence and/or quality of a higher education institution's student religious accommodation policy predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?
2. What, if any, patterns exist in the institutional characteristics and student religious accommodation policy texts at institutions where non-Christian students perceive the most welcoming and supportive environments for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?

Fulfilling the objective of research question 1 to assess the "presence and/or quality of a higher education institution's student religious accommodation policy," the findings associated with the location and analysis of religious accommodation policies are covered in the Phase 1 section. Fulfilling research question 1's focus on what can "predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their worldviews," findings relating to predictors of non-Christian student perceptions of support and welcome are located in the Phase 2 section. The Phase 3 section highlights findings related to the exemplar institutions that scored highly on non-Christian student perceptions of support and welcome, identifying patterns between their policy texts and institutional characteristics in accordance with research question 2.

### **Phase 1 Findings**

In total, religious accommodation policies were identified for 55 (45.5%) of the 121 institutions included in Phase 1 of the analysis. This means that 66 (54.5%) of the institutions did

not have religious accommodation policies that were publicly visible. As previously noted, the absence of a religious accommodation policy is a manifestation of Christian hegemonic neglect of the needs of non-Christians. This high percentage of institutions lacking a policy—a majority of the institutional sample—is extremely concerning, and indicative of a serious and widespread equity issue in this arena. By the combined measure of institution type and religious affiliation, there were stark differences in likelihood of a policy being present. Roughly 81% of public universities in the sample had religious accommodation policies compared to 58.1% of private-nonsectarian universities, 24.1% of Protestant institutions, 21.4% of Catholic colleges, and 6.6% of Evangelical institutions. Table 15 presents the full tallies of whether an accommodation policy was present or not by institution type.

**Table 15**

*Presence of a Religious Accommodation Policy by Institution Type*

Policy Presence	Catholic	Evangelical	Protestant	Nonsectarian	Public	Total	%
No policy	11 (79%)	14 (93%)	22 (76%)	13 (42%)	6 (19%)	66	54.5
Policy	3 (21%)	1 (7%)	7 (24%)	18 (58%)	26 (81%)	55	45.5
Total	14	15	29	31	32	121	100.0
% of Sample	11.6	12.4	24.0	25.6	26.4	100	100.0

The frequency of public institutions having religious accommodation policies is noteworthy, and may in part be a byproduct of state-level legislation in a handful of states that mandate public higher education institutions provide such a policy for students. However, some of those state policies, such as Washington’s, also apply to private higher education institutions, so that effect is not entirely limited to public colleges and universities. The scarcity of Evangelical colleges providing a policy is likely partially explained by single-faith institutions

within that sample, which would not necessitate policies due to their exclusive admissions practices. Comparing Christian-affiliated (Evangelical, Catholic, and Protestant) and secular (public and nonsectarian) institutions, a Wilcoxon Rank-Sum test confirmed that the differences in the likelihood of a policy being present between the two groups was significant at the .01 level ( $z=-5.592$ ).

By urbanicity, policies were present at 54.1% of city-based universities, 46.9% of universities located in suburbs, 31.6% of town-set institutions, and 11.1% of rural-located institutions. The full findings by urbanicity—which provides more minute details on subcategories—are located in Table 16.

**Table 16**

*Presence of a Religious Accommodation Policy by Urbanicity*

Urbanicity	No Policy	Policy	Total	%
City (Large)	14 (52%)	13 (48%)	27	22.3
City (Midsize)	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	11	9.1
City (Small)	10 (43%)	13 (57%)	23	19.0
Suburb (Large)	14 (56%)	11 (44%)	25	20.7
Suburb (Midsize)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	4	3.3
Suburb (Small)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	3	2.5
Town (Distant)	8 (67%)	4 (33%)	12	9.9
Town (Fringe)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	2	1.7
Town (Remote)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5	4.1
Rural (Distant)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	5	4.1
Rural (Fringe)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4	3.3

The findings by urbanicity indicate that institutions located in cities and suburbs are more likely to have policies than those in rural or town settings. This finding lines up with the suggestion from Mutakabbir and Nurridin (2016) that the spiritual well-being of religiously minoritized students is impacted by the urbanicity of their institutions: the likelihood of a college or university offering a religious accommodation policy seems to correspond to their urbanicity. However, even in city settings, institutional religious accommodation policies appear to be far from widespread.

By region, 83.3% of institutions located in New England had an evident policy, compared to 66.7% of colleges in the Southwest, 62.5% of Far West institutions, 60% of colleges in the Rocky Mountain region, 52% of schools in the Mid-East, 43.3% of institutions in the Southeast, 36.5% of colleges in the Great Lakes region, 14.3% of schools in the Plains, and no institutions in other outlying regions. The full count of sampled institutions with and without religious accommodation policies, grouped by region, is located in Table 17.

**Table 17**

*Presence of a Religious Accommodation Policy by Region*

Region	No Policy	Policy	Total	%
New England	1 (17%)	5 (83%)	6	5.0
Southwest	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	6	5.0
Far West	3 (37%)	5 (63%)	8	6.6
Rockies	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	5	4.1
Mid-East	12 (48%)	13 (52%)	25	20.7
Southeast	17 (57%)	13 (43%)	30	24.8
Great Lakes	16 (62%)	10 (38%)	26	21.5



**Table 17** (continued).

Plains	12 (86%)	2 (14%)	14	11.6
Outlying Areas	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1	0.8

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By region, the findings on the presence of religious accommodation policies raise a number of questions. Institutions in the New England region were the most likely to have a religious accommodation policy, whereas institutions in the Plains region were far less likely to provide a policy. However, the institution samples for each region were generally low. The outlying areas region only had a single institution, for instance, so there are few conclusions that can be drawn from these findings. However, a more robust region-focused analysis—or a state-level one—is justified based on these indications. It is possible that the policies of individual states within these regions may shed light on why some regions are more likely than others to have institutions with or without religious accommodation policies.

The full scores from the policy scorecard are reported in Table 18. The mean score for all institutions was 2.15 out of a maximum score of 11—a starkly low average. When limiting only to institutions with present policies (a minimum score of 1), the mean score was still quite low at 4.73 out of a maximum score of 11. While this is certainly a higher average, it is concerning that the policies that do exist score so low; a poorly composed policy could pose equity concerns by codifying harmful practices that may impede students utilizing them or negatively impact their campus experience. The two highest scoring institutions—both private-nonsectarian—scored 8 out of 11 points. By institution type, the mean score for public institutions was 3.56, Catholic institutions yielded 1.00, private, nonsectarian colleges scored 3.03, Protestant colleges were measured at 1.17, and across Evangelical colleges, the mean came in at 0.27. Amalgamated into Christian-affiliated and secular colleges, Christian-affiliated institutions had a mean score of 0.90

and secular colleges had a score of 3.30. As with the binary version of the policy score, Evangelical institutions scored very low. However, Catholic and Protestant colleges also scored very low, with a significant gap between the Christian-affiliated institutions and the mean scores for private-nonsectarian and public institutions. However, even the mean score for public institutions—the highest scoring institutional group—was rather low, and a significant cause for concern.

**Table 18**

*Full Score Count from Religious Accommodation Policy Scorecard*

Score	Institutions	%
0	66	54.5
1	0	0.0
2	2	1.7
3	9	7.4
4	15	12.4
5	14	11.6
6	8	6.6
7	5	4.1
8	2	1.7
9	0	0.0
10	0	0.0
11	0	0.0

For specific items on the scorecard, it is notable that no sampled institution scored a point for Item 9, meaning that no institutions included a note on privilege or power in relation to

religious accommodation policies. For Item 6, which covered whether accommodations outside of the classroom setting were considered, only 12 institutions—9.8% of the total sample and 21.8% of analyzed policies—scored points. This percentage of institutions neglecting religious accommodation needs outside of the classroom setting was even higher than what was reported by Maples et. al (2021), who found that 25% of institutional policies failed to account for needs outside of the classroom. Similarly, this study found that only 49% of analyzed religious accommodation policies provided appeals processes (Item 2) compared to Maples et al. (2021), who found appeals processes in 72% of policies. Table 19 provides a count of how many institutions scored points for each scorecard item.

**Table 19**

*Percent and Count of Institutions Earning Points for Each Scorecard Item*

Items	Institutions	%
Item 1: Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?	55	45.5
Item 2: Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?	27	22.3
Item 3: Does the policy identify a committee or staff member who is responsible for arranging religious accommodation requests?	5	4.1
Item 4: Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?	41	33.9
Item 5: Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?	45	37.2
Item 6: Does the policy apply to needed religious accommodations outside of the classroom setting (dietary accommodations, prayer space needs, etc.)?	24	19.8

**Table 19** (continued).

Item 7: Does the policy allow a student to submit a religious accommodation request without having to directly declare their religious, secular, or spiritual identity to an authority figure?	5	4.1
Item 8: Is a specific office or department identified as being responsible for overseeing the student religious accommodation policy?	24	19.8
Item 9: Does the policy acknowledge Christian privilege, note the existence of power dynamics between religious traditions, or acknowledge the importance of religious diversity for the institution?	0	0.0
Item 10: Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: 'undue hardship,' 'sincerely held,' and 'reasonable accommodation?'	34	28.1

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## Phase 2 Findings

The two dependent variables for the Phase 2 analysis: non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs and non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression, yielded overall means of 19.51 (out of a maximum of 25) and 15.90 (out of a maximum of 20), respectively. Table 20 details the mean scores for each of the items summed for the welcoming campus variable along with the percentage of students who agreed with each, and Table 21 provides the same information for the institutional support variable items.

**Table 20***Mean Scores and Student Responses for “Welcoming Campus” Variable Items*

Item	Mean Score	% Agree
This campus is a welcoming place for Atheists	4.16	80.0
This campus is a welcoming place for Buddhists	3.88	66.1
This campus is a welcoming place for Hindus	3.83	65.7
This campus is a welcoming place for Jews	4.01	74.7
This campus is a welcoming place for Muslims	3.63	61.9

*Note.* “Percent agree” combines student responses that indicated either “agree somewhat” or “agree strongly”

**Table 21***Mean Scores and Student Responses for “Institutional Support for Spiritual Expression” Variable Items*

Item	Mean Score	% Agree
This campus is a safe place for me to express my worldview	4.07	81.9
Faculty and staff on my campus accommodate my needs with regard to celebrating holidays and other important observances connected to my religious or non-religious worldview	3.79	57.3
There is a place on this campus where I can express my personal worldview	4.09	79.5
My classes are safe places for me to express my worldview	3.95	74.6

*Note.* “Percent agree” combines student responses that indicated either “agree somewhat” or “agree strongly”

The results of all four models of the multilevel regression analysis are located in Table 22.

**Table 22**

*Multilevel Modeling Regression Findings: Non-Christian Student Perceptions of a Non-Christian RSSI Welcoming Campus and Space for Spiritual Support and Expression*

Variables	Welcoming Campus for Non-Christian RSSIs						Space for Support and Spiritual Expression					
	Model 1 (Full Policy Score)			Model 2 (Binary Policy Score)			Model 3 (Full Policy Score)			Model 4 (Binary Policy Score)		
	B	Sig.	SE	B	Sig.	SE	B	Sig.	SE	B	Sig.	SE
<b>Institution level</b>												
<u>Summed Items</u>												
Involvement Opportunities	0.029		0.049	0.036		0.049	0.017		0.037	0.013		0.038
Curricular Opportunities	-0.072		0.049	-0.070		0.048	0.001		0.037	0.003		0.038
Supportive Spaces	-0.040		0.048	-0.046		0.048	0.020		0.036	0.017		0.036
RSSI diversity policies	0.041		0.049	0.038		0.048	-0.013		0.037	-0.011		0.038
<u>Religious affiliation</u>												
Catholic	0.105		0.120	0.094		0.118	0.165		0.099	0.174		0.100
Protestant	0.213	*	0.084	0.201	*	0.083	0.130		0.068	0.129		0.069
Public	0.045		0.090	0.088		0.093	0.042		0.071	0.041		0.075
Private-Secular	0.163		0.085	0.157		0.083	0.057		0.066	0.050		0.066
Evangelical	-0.526	***	0.153	-0.540	***	0.151	-0.393	**	0.127	-0.393	**	0.128
<u>Urbanicity</u>												
City (Large)	0.322	***	0.093	0.323	***	0.092	0.040		0.074	0.034		0.074
City (Midsize)	0.337	**	0.125	0.349	**	0.123	0.085		0.094	0.085		0.095
City (Small)	0.164		0.090	0.195	*	0.089	0.048		0.071	0.061		0.072
Rural (Distant)	-0.581		0.343	-0.604		0.341	-0.234		0.348	-0.225		0.349
Rural (Fringe)	-0.658	**	0.213	-0.698	***	0.210	-0.240		0.176	-0.258		0.177
Town (Distant)	-0.073		0.120	-0.083		0.119	-0.016		0.099	-0.020		0.099
Town (Fringe)	0.424		0.270	0.443		0.266	0.128		0.216	0.133		0.218
Town (Remote)	-0.265		0.209	-0.254		0.205	-0.146		0.148	-0.141		0.150
Suburb (Large)	0.194		0.104	0.212	*	0.103	0.068		0.081	0.078		0.082
Suburb (Midsize)	0.096		0.172	0.121		0.170	0.218		0.133	0.225		0.134
Suburb (Small)	0.039		0.201	-0.005		0.197	0.049		0.162	0.028		0.163
<u>Region</u>												
Far West	0.265		0.150	0.277		0.148	0.139		0.122	0.138		0.123
Great Lakes	0.016		0.121	0.017		0.120	-0.043		0.105	-0.045		0.106
Mid-East	0.267	*	0.120	0.292	*	0.119	0.066		0.104	0.073		0.104

**Table 22** (continued).

New England	0.566	***	0.174	0.591	***	0.172	0.292	*	0.140	0.283	*	0.141
Outlying areas	-0.455		0.657	-0.524		0.656	-0.450		0.647	-0.454		0.648
Plains	-0.650	***	0.157	-0.673	***	0.156	-0.297	*	0.138	-0.300	*	0.139
Rocky Mountains	-0.567	***	0.164	-0.601	***	0.162	-0.204		0.132	-0.213		0.133
Southeast	0.090		0.116	0.098		0.155	0.143		0.102	0.144		0.102
Southwest	0.468	**	0.171	0.523	**	0.171	0.354	*	0.141	0.374	**	0.143
<u>Policy Score</u>												
Binary				-0.233	*	0.093				-0.070		0.074
Full Score	-0.089	*	0.045				-0.042		0.034			
<u>Student Level</u>												
International	0.016		0.084	0.018		0.839	0.012		0.089	0.014		0.089
First-generation	-0.012		0.045	-0.012		0.045	-0.007		0.048	-0.008		0.048
<u>Gender</u>												
Cis woman	0.043		0.094	0.043		0.094	0.270	**	0.099	0.269	**	0.099
Another gender	0.285		0.327	0.282		0.327	0.255		0.346	0.255		0.346
Trans nonbinary	-0.113		0.155	-0.110		0.155	0.054		0.165	0.056		0.165
Trans man	-0.485	*	0.242	-0.483	*	0.242	-0.460		0.248	-0.457		0.248
Trans woman	-0.015		0.358	-0.017		0.358	-0.408		0.380	-0.410		0.380
Nonbinary	-0.015		0.156	-0.015		0.156	0.006		0.165	0.005		0.165
Cis man	0.299	**	0.098	0.298	**	0.098	0.282	**	0.103	0.281	**	0.103
<u>Sexual orientation</u>												
Bisexual	-0.044		0.050	-0.044		0.050	-0.033		0.053	-0.033		0.053
Gay	-0.108		0.092	-0.107		0.092	0.149		0.097	0.147		0.097
Heterosexual	0.100	*	0.040	0.100	*	0.040	-0.016		0.042	-0.017		0.042
Lesbian	0.117		0.100	0.117		0.100	0.065		0.106	0.066		0.105
Queer	-0.006		0.078	-0.005		0.078	0.013		0.083	0.013		0.083
Another orient.	-0.060		0.080	-0.061		0.080	-0.178	*	0.084	-0.176	*	0.084
<u>Race</u>												
African American/Black	-0.223		0.121	-0.224		0.121	-0.098		0.128	-0.098		0.128
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.102		0.088	0.103		0.088	0.193	*	0.093	0.193	*	0.093
Latino	0.040		0.104	0.040		0.104	0.201		0.110	0.202		0.110
Native American	-0.447		0.450	-0.448		0.450	-1.260	**	0.478	-1.261	**	0.478
White	0.124		0.084	0.124		0.084	0.373	***	0.089	0.373	***	0.089
Another race	0.337	*	0.148	0.336	*	0.148	0.395	*	0.156	0.394	*	0.156
Multiracial	0.068		0.093	0.068		0.093	0.196	*	0.099	0.197	*	0.099
<u>RSSI</u>												
Atheism	-0.026		0.091	-0.027		0.091	0.186		0.095	0.184		0.095
Hinduism	0.054		0.152	0.053		0.152	0.369	*	0.160	0.369	*	0.160
Judaism	-0.150		0.133	-0.152		0.133	0.178		0.141	0.177		0.141
Islam	0.191		0.139	0.190		0.139	0.258		0.147	0.257		0.147

**Table 22** (continued).

Another minority RSSI	0.148	0.120	0.147	0.120	0.292	*	0.127	0.291	*	0.127
Another nonreligious RSSI	0.096	0.110	0.096	0.110	0.327	**	0.117	0.326	**	0.117
Another RSSI	0.025	0.135	0.025	0.135	0.051		0.142	0.052		0.142

\* =  $p < .05$  \*\* =  $p < .01$  \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

For Model 1, which had the dependent variable of perception of welcome for non-Christian RSSIs and included the full score policy independent variable, the positive predictors included Protestant institutional religious affiliation ( $B = 0.213, p < .05$ ), the urbanicity variables of large cities ( $B = 0.322, p < .001$ ) and midsize cities ( $B = 0.337, p < .01$ ), the region variables for Mideast ( $B = 0.267, p < .05$ ), New England ( $B = 0.566, p < .001$ ), and Southwest ( $B = 0.468, p < .01$ ), cisgender male gender identity ( $B = 0.299, p < .01$ ), heterosexual sexual orientation ( $B = 0.100, p < .05$ ), and the “another race” race variable ( $B = 0.337, p < .05$ ). Meanwhile, the negative predictors for Model 1 included Evangelical institutional religious affiliation ( $B = -0.526, p < .001$ ), institutions located in fringe rural settings ( $B = -0.658, p < .01$ ), the region variables for the Plains ( $B = -0.650, p < .001$ ) and Rocky Mountains ( $B = -0.567, p < .001$ ), trans male gender identity ( $B = -0.485, p < .05$ ), and the variable indicating the full score for a religious accommodation policy ( $B = -0.089, p < .05$ ).

The positive significant predictors in Model 2, which used the same dependent variable of perception of welcome for non-Christian RSSIs and included the binary policy independent variable to indicate whether a policy was visible, were Protestant institutional religious affiliation ( $B = 0.201, p < .05$ ), the urbanicity variables for large cities ( $B = 0.323, p < .001$ ), midsize cities ( $B = 0.349, p < .01$ ), small cities ( $B = 0.195, p < .05$ ), and large suburbs ( $B = 0.212, p < .05$ ), the region variables for the Mideast ( $B = 0.292, p < .05$ ), New England ( $B = 0.591, p < .001$ ), and Southwest ( $B = 0.523, p < .01$ ), cisgender male gender identity ( $B = 0.298, p < .01$ ), v, heterosexual sexual orientation ( $B = 0.100, p < .05$ ), and the “another race” race variable ( $B =$



0.336,  $p < .05$ ). The negative predictors for Model 2 included Evangelical institutional religious affiliation ( $B = -0.540$ ,  $p < .001$ ), institutions located in fringe rural settings ( $B = -0.698$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the region variables for the Plains ( $B = -0.673$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Rocky Mountains ( $B = -0.601$ ,  $p < .001$ ), trans male gender identity ( $B = -0.483$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the binary variable indicating the presence or absence of a religious accommodation policy ( $B = -0.233$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

To begin, it is notable that the policy variables were statistically significant predictors in Models 1 and 2, but with negative coefficients. This means that students generally perceived a less welcoming environment for non-Christian RSSIs at campuses with policies and with higher scoring policies. However, this finding should be tempered with the context of how low the policy scores were on the Phase 1 scorecard. Exploring the data analysis process more closely, the coefficients for these policies were not negative until the regions were included in the models—notably, the New England region. This suggests that the generally positive perceptions of students in that region were impacting the policy variables, and controlling for that region revealed the negative relationship between the policy variables and student perceptions of non-Christian RSSI campus welcoming. Understanding why this negative relationship exists requires future exploration, but it may be related to the potentially detrimental effects of poorly composed policies: essentially, the existence of a policy is not always an improvement over the absence of one, particularly if the policy explicitly codifies intimidating or inefficient procedures. Additionally, a large portion of the sampled population likely never had to use a religious accommodation policy, considering how many of them are identified under the nonreligious umbrella. Lastly, it is likely that the robustness of a religious accommodation policy is simply not an apt reflection of institutional priorities around RSSI diversity (at least that students can

perceive). Curricular offerings on the topic of religion and interfaith co-curricular programming are likely more visible and impactful on a student's on-campus experience.

Regarding institution-level independent variables, students perceived less welcome for non-Christians at Evangelical institutions, colleges located in fringe rural areas, and at institutions located in the Plains and Rocky Mountains regions. The finding for Evangelical colleges is not unexpected, given their missions, messaging, sometime explicitly exclusive admissions practices, and the lack of religious accommodation policies indicated by Phase 1. By and large, it appears that these institutions are not attempting to be welcoming for students from non-Christian RSSIs. The Model 1 and 2 findings regarding urbanicity—that students at fringe rural institutions view their institutions as less welcoming, and students at city-based institutions view them as more welcoming—support the claim from Mutakabbir and Nurrudin (2016) regarding the different experiences of students from minoritized RSSIs based on the urbanicity of their institutions. The findings from Models 1 and 2 regarding region are somewhat more perplexing: students attending institutions in the Southwest, Mid-east, and New England regions tended to view their colleges as more welcoming on average, whereas students in the Rocky Mountains and Plains regions were, on average, more likely to report their campuses as less welcoming. Through a political lens, it makes sense that students at New England institutions perceive higher non-Christian RSSI welcoming. However, the negative associations between non-Christian RSSI welcome at institutions in the Rocky Mountains and Plains regions merit further exploration with future studies, as does the positive association for students at Southwest and Mid-east institutions. It is possible that these are reflections of specific state-level policies, contexts at the time of data collection, or unique aspects of the handful of institutions sampled from within these regions.

A number of student-level variables surfaced in Models 1 and 2 as predictors of perceptions of a welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs. Notably, for gender, all of the categories for trans and nonbinary students had negative coefficients, though only trans men reported a lower perception of minoritized RSSI welcoming at a statistically significant level. While the questions that made up this variable specifically asked about how welcoming students felt the campus was for minoritized RSSIs, it is worth noting that non-Christian trans students tended to perceive a less welcoming climate for these groups. Cisgender men were the only gender category that reported significantly higher perceptions of welcome for non-Christian RSSI groups. These findings potentially hint at a connection between gendered power dynamics and RSSI power dynamics on college campuses that could be explored more fully in future studies. The other statistically significant student-level predictors in Models 1 and 2 were the race category “another race” and heterosexual sexual orientation, which were both positive. The heterosexual finding may also indicate that further exploration is needed regarding how RSSI power dynamics and the power dynamics of sexual orientation intertwine on college campuses. The “another race” finding is difficult to interpret given the non-specificity of that category, but it could justify further exploration.

Models 3 and 4 used the dependent variable of non-Christian student perceptions of space for support and spiritual expression. Model 3 used the full score policy independent variable, whereas Model 4 used the binary policy independent variable: however, neither proved to be significant predictors in these models. Significant positive predictors for Model 3 included the New England ( $B = 0.292, p < .05$ ) and Southwest ( $B = 0.354, p < .05$ ) regions, the gender variables of cisgender man ( $B = 0.282, p < .01$ ) and cisgender woman ( $B = 0.270, p < .01$ ), the race variables Asian American/Pacific Islander ( $B = 0.193, p < .05$ ), White ( $B = 0.373, p < .001$ ),

Another Race ( $B = 0.395, p < .05$ ), and Multiracial ( $B = 0.196, p < .05$ ), and the RSSI variables for Hinduism ( $B = 0.369, p < .05$ ), Another minority RSSI ( $B = 0.292, p < .05$ ), and Another nonreligious RSSI ( $B = 0.327, p < .01$ ). The negative predictors for Model 3 included Evangelical institutional religious affiliation ( $B = -0.393, p < .01$ ), the Plains region ( $B = -0.297, p < .05$ ), the “another sexual orientation” sexual orientation variable ( $B = -0.178, p < .05$ ), and the Native American race category ( $B = -1.260, p < .01$ ). Significant predictors for Model 4 were virtually identical in direction and magnitude to Model 3, though the Southwest region had a higher significance level than in Model 3 ( $p < .01$  in Model 4, compared to  $p < .05$  in Model 3).

Models 3 and 4 found few significant predictors at the institution level for the non-Christian student perceptions of institutional space and support for expression variable. However, it is notable that all of the variables that were significant in these models were also significant predictors for the welcoming campus variable in Models 1 and 2. Non-Christian students at Evangelical institutions reported less institutional support at a statistically significant level according to both Models 3 and 4. By region, students at institutions in New England and the Southwest reported significantly higher perceptions of institutional support, whereas students at colleges in the Plains reported significantly less support.

Models 3 and 4 found a greater number of statistically significant student-level predictors for student perceptions of space for support and spiritual expression. In terms of gender, cisgender women and cisgender men both reported significantly higher perceptions of institutional support for their spiritual expressions. The sexual orientation “another sexual orientation” was a positive predictor of student perceptions of support, which poses similar challenges to interpretation as the race category of “another race,” which was also a significant positive predictor. Four other racial categories yielded significant results: Asian/Pacific Islander,

White, and Multiracial students had significantly more positive perceptions of institutional support than other racial groups, whereas Native American students perceived lower levels of institutional support perceptions on average. Three RSSIs were positively associated with perceptions of institutional support for spiritual expression: Hinduism, the amalgamated category of “another minority RSSI,” and the category “another nonreligious RSSI.” First, it is intriguing that “another nonreligious RSSI” was a significant predictor in both Model 3 and Model 4 while Atheism was not, which indicates some nuanced difference between nonreligious categories that are often combined together. The findings that Hindu students and those from other minoritized RSSIs tend to perceive their campuses as more supportive of their spiritual expressions is a good sign for the state of college campuses, though it would have been more insightful to know about the perceptions for the specific RSSIs within the “other minority RSSI” category. It is possible that there are differences within this amalgamated group that are hidden by combining them together.

On the whole, Models 1 and 2 indicate essentially the same findings in relation to the welcoming campus dependent variable, as the only difference between them is whether the policy variable is the full score from Phase 1 or a binary indicator of whether a policy exists. Because institutions generally scored low on the Phase 1 scorecard, these variables functionally looked very similar for the purpose of the models. The same is true for what Models 3 and 4 indicate for the supportive campus dependent variable. However, the few differences within these pairs are interesting. Essentially, using the binary score in Model 2 (as opposed to the full score variable from Model 1) revealed a statistically significant predictive relationship for the urbanicity independent variables for small cities and large suburbs, which were on the cusp of significance in Model 1. Basically, when accounting for the quality of a religious

accommodation policy (through the use of the full score variable) rather than just its presence, these two variables lost significance. The difference between Models 3 and 4 revealed a similar effect: when the quality of a policy was taken into account (Model 3), then the level of significance for the Southwest region dropped from what was found in Model 4. Essentially, including the quality through the inclusion of the scorecard measure— instead of just the binary score indicating presence – partially accounted for the significance of the Southwest region’s predictive power for student perceptions of institutional space and support.

### **Phase 3 Findings**

Phase 3 focused on examining five institutions that scored highly on both of Phase 2’s dependent variable measures in order to identify patterns between the institutions. These institutions were pseudonymized as Public Mideast, Private Southwest, Protestant Southeast, Private Mideast, and Private Southeast based on their affiliations and regions. The analytical process of Phase 3 included re-examinations of the institution’s religious accommodation policies; reviewing institutional communications, programs, and curricular offerings around the topic of religion; and looking at each institution’s general characteristics and histories.

#### ***Public Mideast***

Public Mideast is the only public institution among the exemplars, and is by far the youngest of the institutions, with a founding date in the 1960s. While the campus does not have a dedicated office of religious life, it does offer an interfaith center as part of a greater office dedicated to well-being, which focused on student well-being as it is connected to religion, spirituality, observations, and practices. Additionally, the college has prominent living learning communities (LLCs) with various themes that sponsor events and promote student community. A number of the LLCs are themed around diversity and multiculturalism and focus in part on

celebrating minoritized religious holidays and traditions. The curriculum of the institution includes an interdisciplinary religious studies minor. The religious accommodation policy for Public Mideast cites a system-wide policy that appears to have bearing on all public higher education institutions in the state. The policy includes an abridged calendar of upcoming major religious holidays, along with an acknowledgement that the calendar is not a reflection of all religious holidays students may observe. While it does provide a detailed appeals process that a student could undertake, the policy also codifies the need for students to directly approach their professors to request an accommodation and only applies to class absence accommodations, omitting guidance for any other forms of religious accommodations. On the Phase 1 scorecard, the Public Mideast policy scored a total of 5/11, earning points for Items 1 (Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?), 2 (Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?), 4 (Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?), 5 (Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?), and 10 (Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: ‘undue hardship,’ ‘sincerely held,’ and ‘reasonable accommodation?’). For the two dependent variables from Phase 2, students gave Public Mideast a mean score of 21.74 out of a maximum of 25 on welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, and a 16.77 out of a maximum score of 20 on perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression – both of which were above average scores for the sample.

### ***Private Southwest***

Private Southwest, unlike the other two private exemplars, never had a denominational affiliation or religious ties at its founding, as it owes its founding to a large private philanthropic

gift from an individual. The institution's curriculum includes a department of religion that appears to promote a pluralistic and critical approach to the study of religion and spirituality. As described on the university website, the department of religion emphasizes a nuanced approach to the topic of religion, considering both positive social influences and the negative effects religion can have on topics related to social justice.

Aside from the department of religion, Private Southwest is also home to a significant faculty-led research and programming center dedicated to promoting religious tolerance and literacy, including advocating for respect and mutual understanding across RSSIs. While Private Southwest does not have a student-focused religious life office, the religion-focused research and programming center hosts numerous lectures and events every semester focused on various religious traditions and current events. The religious accommodation policy for Private Southwest includes an abridged list of religious holidays that may require accommodation, along with a note that it is not comprehensive and an invitation to contact a specified staff person to add other holidays to the list. The text of the policy specifies that instructors are required to make "reasonable" accommodations to avoid negative academic consequences for their students related to their religious observances, and that compelling a student to pick between a religious observance and academic work is unacceptable. These passages imply that a professor cannot outright deny an accommodation request. However, the policy does not apply to needs beyond class absences, still requires a student to approach a professor directly to make a request, does not reference any kind of appeals process, and employs the language of "reasonableness," which leaves a door open for interpretation as to what practices/beliefs are "reasonable." On the Phase 1 scorecard, Private Southwest scored the lowest of the exemplar institutions, with a 3/11, only earning points for Items 1 (Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy



for students?), 4 (Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?), and 5 (Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?)—essentially only earning points for omitting the negative policy elements of requiring a verification statement or proof of affiliation in order to provide accommodations. It is notable that one of the exemplar institutions scored very low on the religious accommodation policy scorecard, indicating that religious accommodation policies do not wholly represent how dedicated an institution is to RSSI diversity and that student perceptions of their campus climate are based on far more than their potential experiences with accommodations. For the two dependent variables from Phase 2, students gave Private Southwest a mean score of 22.43 out of a maximum of 25 on welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, and a 17.11 out of a maximum score of 20 on perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression – which were the highest scores for each category among the eligible institutions.

### ***Protestant Southeast***

Protestant Southeast is the only exemplar institution with a current religious affiliation, which it has maintained since shortly after its founding in the 1800s. Despite this affiliation, the college clearly communicates that while the institution is explicitly Christian-affiliated, the campus offers opportunities for students from a variety of diverse spiritual and religious backgrounds to grow in their own traditions. The college has a staffed Religious Life office, though many of its offerings are explicitly Christian-focused services and events. The Religious Life office does sponsor a variety of specifically labeled interfaith service opportunities and events, notably, despite most of the programs being Christian-centered. The college also hosts a faculty-led research center dedicated to the academic study of religion and philosophy, which

sponsors conferences, discussions, and other events on campus. The curriculum of the college includes a religious studies department that emphasizes the importance of studying and engaging with a wide range of world religions. Of particular note is that the institution integrates its denominational affiliation and religious purpose widely, including in its mission statement. There is no attempt to conceal or shy away from the Christian roots of the institution. Communications from the university regarding religion do attempt to balance the Christian founding and purpose of the institution with a stated emphasis on respect for the diverse religious convictions of its students, regardless of what those convictions are. The religious accommodation policy for Protestant Southeast scored 5/11 points on the Phase 1 scorecard, earning points for Items 1 (Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?), 2 (Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?), 4 (Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?), 5 (Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?), and 10 (Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: ‘undue hardship,’ ‘sincerely held,’ and ‘reasonable accommodation?’). While the policy is both brief and minimal—it is only two paragraphs long and only applies to classroom absences for religious holidays—it does provide an appeals process and avoids employing problematic elements and language present in other policies. For the two dependent variables from Phase 2, students gave Protestant Southeast a mean score of 21.48 out of a maximum of 25 on welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, and a 16.81 out of a maximum score of 20 on perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression: both of which were above average scores for their categories.

### *Private Mideast*

Private Mideast, though always a secular institution, was originally founded by a collection of local Christian clergy as a women's college in late 1800s. Private Mideast offers a curricular minor focused on religion and its relationship with social justice, which appears to take a critical perspective in teaching the effects of religion with a focus on power dynamics and the intersections of oppressions. It also has an active Religious Life office composed of multiple staff members, with language on the website about religious accommodations that emphasizes that all manner of university staff are encouraged to provide student religious accommodations pertaining to food, housing, meals, and attendance. Interestingly, the religious accommodation policy as written for the institution only applies to classroom absences for holidays (though other communications indicate a broader application), requires students to directly request accommodations from their professors and disclose their RSSI to them, and generally did not score particularly highly on the Phase 1 scorecard (5/11). In total, it earned points for Items 1 (Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?), 5 (Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?), 6 (Does the policy apply to needed religious accommodations outside of the classroom setting?), and 8 (Is a specific office or department identified as being responsible for overseeing the student religious accommodation policy?). However, there is a note on the website that the policy is under revision, to be updated for the 2023-2024 academic year, which could indicate an active attempt to improve their procedures. An article that interviewed various staff members at Private Mideast emphasized the importance of serving the unique needs of minoritized religious students, with one staff member stating that they were specifically passionate about providing for the space and practicing needs for students from

religious minorities. For the two dependent variables from Phase 2, students gave Private Mideast a mean score of 21.64 out of a maximum of 25 on welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, and a 16.76 out of a maximum score of 20 on perceived institutional space and support for spiritual expression – both of which were above average scores for eligible institutions.

### *Private Southeast*

Private Southeast, another of the exemplar institutions, was originally chartered by a Protestant Christian denomination and was founded with an explicitly Christian mission to prepare individuals for careers in ministry, though it secularized in the middle of the twentieth century. In reference to Private Southeast's Christian origins, a staff member is quoted as saying that the institution's respect for different faiths has roots in the college's traditional association with Christianity, but they also noted that Christianity's influence on the campus has become increasingly subtle over recent years. As with Private Mideast, Private Southeast has a dedicated Religious Life office with numerous listed staff members and affiliates associated with specific RSSIs, including Judaism and Islam. The website for the Religious Life office explicitly states that the campus is openly considered multifaith, and that students from all religious and nonreligious traditions are welcome.

This messaging clarifies a pluralistic vision of campus and specifically names a number of small and marginalized RSSIs in the in vivo text, which would almost certainly put students associated with those RSSIs more at ease and make them feel seen and supported on campus. Aside from departments of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies, Private Southeast also has a notable academic research and scholarship center focused on the interdisciplinary study of religion with dedicated staff, assigned faculty, sponsored public events, and undergraduate curricular programs.

Much like Private Mideast, Private Southeast also scored a modest 5/11 on Phase 1's religious accommodation policy scorecard, earning points for Items 1 (Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?), 2 (Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?), 4 (Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?), 5 (Does the policy omit the requirement of any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?), and 10 (Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: 'undue hardship,' 'sincerely held,' and 'reasonable accommodation?'). While the policy only has bearing on classroom absences, it does provide a clear appeals process and explicitly states that class absences for religious holidays are excused, meaning a professor does not have the power to outright deny a student accommodation request. Students do not have to contact their professor(s) themselves to make their accommodation request. Instead, that contact is done through an online form, which is likely less intimidating than making such a request in person. The text notes that the form sends copies of the request to the named professor, the requesting student, and the related academic dean, which provides accountability to the process and would likely further serve to make the process less intimidating. The policy text itself also contains an up-to-date—though abridged—list of religious holidays that fall within the current semester. While the exclusion of many holidays is a concern, the end of the policy includes a note with a staff member's contact info if a student practices a tradition or observes a holiday that is omitted from the list.

For the two dependent variables from Phase 2, students gave Private Southeast a mean score of 18.47 out of a maximum of 25 on welcoming campus for non-Christian RSSIs, and a 16.87 out of a maximum score of 20 on perceived institutional space and support for spiritual

expression. The mean score for the institutional support variable was the second highest among eligible institutions, but the mean score for the welcoming campus variable was notably below average for the sample. However, the composite of the scores earned its selection as an exemplar institution.

### *Commonalities Between Exemplars*

A number of commonalities stand out between the exemplar institutions. First, three of the five exemplars were private-nonsectarian institutions. When considering religious affiliation, four of the five exemplars were secular (either private-nonsectarian or public), and only one was—at least presently—Christian affiliated (Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical). This finding that the institutions with more positive perceptions from non-Christian students were secular rather than Christian-affiliated is in line with MRSCC's prediction about the differential impact of institutional religious affiliation on religiously minoritized student experiences and perceptions. Another commonality of note is that each of the institutions offered some form of co-curricular programming that was specifically focused around interfaith, though their forms varied. Public Mideast, for instance, had living learning communities that revolved around minoritized religious holidays, whereas Private Southwest had lectures and events about religious topics through their religion research center, and Protestant Southeast had a Religious Life office that offered student-focused programming. Notably, three of the exemplar institutions had research centers dedicated to the study of religion, and all of the exemplars offered at least one department or program dedicated to the study of diverse religious traditions—either of which could have contributed to student perceptions of institutional support or welcoming through curricular exposure. In terms of Carnegie Classification, three exemplar institutions were Doctoral Universities (of which two were classified as R1) and Baccalaureate Colleges. Given

the apparent influence of research centers and co-curricular programming on student perceptions, the high marks enjoyed by the likely better-resourced R1 institutions are not particularly surprising. By region, the Southeast and Mideast each had two institutions represented in the set of five exemplars, which is notably disproportionate.

Lastly, it is intriguing that none of the exemplar institutions' policies performed well on Phase 1's scorecard. However, four of the exemplar institutions' policies did exhibit unique positive elements. The policy for Private Southeast automatically copying a relevant Dean on any student-submitted accommodation request provided a form of accountability that few policies could match. Private Mideast's acknowledgement that its policy was insufficient and under revision was the only one of its kind across the entire sample, and exemplified attention towards improvement over time. Private Southwest's strong language assuring that a request cannot be outright denied by a professor was unique and almost certainly would put a nervous student at ease. Public Mideast provided a detailed appeals process in the case that a student felt that their accommodation was unjustly denied, which stood out when compared with many other appeals processes that tended to be far less specific. These were all positive aspects of the exemplar institutions' religious accommodation policies, but none of them received unique credit on the Phase 1 scorecard. Based on this, the scorecard can be improved to account for additional laudable policy elements, such as built-in accountability measures, and reflect differences in the quality for individual items. For instance, not all appeals processes are necessarily of equal quality, so the scorecard could be improved to reflect those differences in quality in the final score.

Looking back at the second research question, Phase 3 was able to identify a number of "patterns" between the institutional characteristics and religious accommodation policies of

institutions that scored highly on student perceptions of both non-Christian RSSI welcoming and institutional space and support for spiritual expression. These institutions proved to be majority secular, had explicit curricular offerings relating to religion, and boasted a variety of co-curricular activities, events, or programming related to religion and spirituality.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, findings from across the three phases of study have been reported and explicitly tied to the guiding research questions. In the final chapter, I will further unpack the key findings in relation to literature and theory, draw connections between the findings across phases, articulate implications for practice, policy, theory, and future research, and acknowledge the study limitations.



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to specifically examine and analyze the relationship between the presence/quality of student religious accommodation policies and non-Christian student perceptions of institutional welcome and space and support in order to help improve institutional policies and create more welcoming and supportive campus atmospheres for non-Christian college students in the United States. This study aimed to identify patterns and themes within standing religious accommodation policies and institutions that are associated with higher non-Christian student perceptions of institutional welcome and space and support in order to provide practical guidance for policy improvement to higher education leaders. To these ends, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does the presence and/or quality of a higher education institution's student religious accommodation policy predict non-Christian student perceptions of a welcoming and supportive campus for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?
2. What, if any, patterns exist in the institutional characteristics and student religious accommodation policy texts at institutions where non-Christian students perceive the most welcoming and supportive environments for their religious, secular, or spiritual identities?

To address these questions, I began by creating a scorecard to assess the quality of religious accommodation policies. Ultimately, I found that religious accommodation policies were absent at a majority of sampled institutions, while those policies that were present received generally low scores on the scorecard. This indicated that the status quo of religious accommodation policies at colleges and universities is poorer than expected, as the scores on

specific scorecard items – such as the presence of appeals processes within policies – were lower than what was anticipated based on prior indications (Maples et al., 2021).

In the second phase of analysis, this study ultimately found that neither the presence nor the quality of religious accommodation policies were positively associated with non-Christian perceptions of institutional space and support or campus welcome for non-Christian RSSIs. Surprisingly, the presence and quality of accommodations policy were associated with more negative views of campus welcome. However, the models highlighted a number of other variables that were statistically significant predictors of perceptions of institutional support and welcome for non-Christian RSSIs.

The results of the third phase of the study identified that institutions with higher student perceptions of support and non-Christian RSSI welcoming tended to provide both curricular offerings relating to religion and co-curricular programming around topics of religion and spirituality and appeared more likely to be secular as opposed to Christian-affiliated.

Four key takeaways from this study that are important to note. First, as indicated by the findings of Phase 1, religious accommodation policies appear to be largely absent at higher education institutions in the United States, and those that do exist tend to be of low quality. Second, Evangelical institutions evidently present a unique hardship for non-Christian students. Third, the location of a university—both in terms of geographic region and urbanicity—appears to have a significant influence on non-Christian student perceptions of their institutions and how likely they are to provide religious accommodation policies. Lastly, the Phase 2 results indicated connections between marginalized identities outside of RSSIs and how supportive and welcoming students felt their campuses were for minoritized RSSIs.

### **Religious Accommodation Policies are Largely Absent or Insufficient**

The first and most prominent takeaway from this study is that the present state of religious accommodation policies in higher education is severely lacking. An unanticipatedly high number of institutions had no evident religious accommodation policy (the majority, at 54.5%). Prior studies of religious accommodation policies did not have a way to analyze absence, and instead focused on studying policy documents that could be located (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Maples et al., 2021; Reed, 1998). Because of this sampling issue, this study was the first to paint a comprehensive picture of the landscape of religious accommodation policies in higher education, which proved to be a largely blank canvas. Even the policies that were found were generally not of high quality, earning a mean score of 4.73 out of 11 on the Phase 1 scorecard – however, this was not surprising, given the lack of standards or guidance for such policies.

Examining the results from specific items on the scorecard raises more cause for concern. None of the located policies scored a point for Item 9 on the scorecard, meaning that no institutions included remarks on privilege or power in relation to religious accommodation policies. In other words, Christian hegemony is at minimum unchallenged—if not bolstered—by these policies. For Item 6, which covered whether accommodations outside of the classroom setting were included in the policy, only 12 institutions—9.8% of the total sample and 21.8% of analyzed policies—scored points. The percentage of institutions considering religious accommodation needs outside of the classroom setting was even lower than what was reported by Maples et. al (2021), who found that 25% of institutional policies were broad enough to encompass accommodation needs beyond the classroom. Similarly, this study found that only 49% of analyzed religious accommodation policies provided appeals processes (Item 2)

compared to Maples et al. (2021), who found appeals processes in 72% of policies. Each of these items indicate major concerns for the overall quality of religious accommodation policies and likely yield negative experiences for the students that have to navigate them. The analysis of Phase 2 found that the presence and quality of a religious accommodation policy were both negative predictors of how welcoming non-Christians perceived their campus climates to be. This suggests that the presence of these policies is not always a positive influence, particularly if they are poorly composed, lack effective power, or aren't being followed by institutional actors.

A possible silver lining of these findings is that, while the state of religious accommodation policies is poor, they do not seem to be having a significant impact on the overall perceptions of non-Christian students of institutional space and support for spiritual expression. The difference between the student perceptions of a welcoming campus climate for non-Christian RSSIs and the perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression is intriguing: it may indicate that students are perceiving hostility towards minoritized RSSI groups on campus beyond the scope of what institutions can control, while simultaneously acknowledging that institutions are making space and indicating support for these RSSIs through official channels, resources, and programs. Regardless of these particular findings, it is now clear that religious accommodation policies require improvement across institution types in order to create a more equitable landscape for students, even if the number of students impacted directly by these policies is small. Prior studies were able to hint at the issue of religious accommodation policies being insufficient to serve the needs of non-Christian students, but they were not able to fully capture the breadth of their absence across institution types as this study has done (Arnold & Sasso, 2018; Maples et al., 2021). However, there is another finding that was consistent throughout all phases of analysis that merits noting. One institution type stood out as the most

overtly unwelcoming and unsupportive according to student perceptions, and was by far the least likely to contain a religious accommodation policy: Evangelical-affiliated colleges.

### **Evangelical Colleges Pose Challenges for Non-Christian Students**

The relative inhospitality for students with minoritized RSSIs at Evangelical institutions is one of the few findings that echoed throughout the three phases of analysis. First, a relatively small number of the sampled students attended Evangelical colleges (55 students, 1.9% of the sample), which makes sense, given their focus on serving Christian students. However, those non-Christian students who found themselves at these institutions generally seemed to struggle with the campus climate and clearly did not see themselves as institutional priorities, which is consistent with indications from prior studies (Bowman et al., 2015; Rockenbach et al., 2018; Rockenbach et al., 2019). For the Phase 1 scorecard to assess religious accommodation policy quality, Evangelical colleges received a mean score of 0.27 out of a maximum score of 11—an incredibly low number than was markedly below the means for all other institution types. Only one Evangelical institution scored above a zero on the scorecard, earning 4/11 points for items 1 (having a religious accommodation policy), 4 (omitting a signed verification statement to receive an accommodation), 5 (omitting proof of belief to receive an accommodation), and 10 (omitting ambiguous legal phrases). Notably, that institution’s policy earned points primarily for harmful elements the policy text did not include, rather than positive elements it did include. All 14 other Evangelical colleges in the sample did not have a religious accommodation policy. In Phase 2, the variable for Evangelical-affiliated institutions was one of very few predictors to be statistically significant across all four models, where it was consistently negatively associated with non-Christian perceptions of institutional space and support for their spiritual expression and perceived campus welcoming for non-Christian RSSIs. Essentially, non-Christian students at

Evangelical institutions rated their institutions as less welcoming and supportive than non-Christians at any other institution type, and they were the least likely to be provided with accommodation procedures. For Phase 3, the sample of exemplar institutions that scored highest for both student perceptions of institutional space and support and non-Christian RSSI welcoming notably did not contain any Evangelical colleges. The findings of this study indicate uniquely negative experiences for non-Christian students at Evangelical institutions, but these experiences mandate further qualitative description in the words of those students themselves. However, the logistics of such a study may pose practical challenges for sampling, as these populations are likely less visible and smaller within these institutions. Additionally, policies at some Evangelical institutions officially require students to be Christian, so non-Christian students identifying themselves could lead to negative consequences.

It is notable that the sample population for this study had a high proportion of both trans and non-heterosexual students. The negative experience of many of these students at Evangelical institutions has been well-documented both within academic research and media coverage (Pappano, 2018; Snow, 2016; Wheeler, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016). Simply being homosexual or trans could be grounds for expulsion or suspension at some Evangelical colleges: the hostility is often overt and rooted in Evangelical beliefs (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019). While this doesn't fully explain the findings of this study relating to Evangelical colleges, the overlap in both the experiences and the populations of non-Christians students and LGBT students are notable.

The findings of this study establish that the climate for non-Christians attending Evangelical institutions is not perceived as supportive or welcoming – which is consistent with the suspicions of prior studies, but beyond what those studies have been able to directly indicate

(Bowman et al., 2015; Rockenbach et al., 2018; Rockenbach et al., 2019). Individual Evangelical colleges – should they desire to appeal to a wider student base – will need to address the issue of their campus climates for potential students outside of their Evangelical worldview. This study also conclusively found that – despite the missions of these institutions and their often exclusive admissions practices – there are non-Christians attending Evangelical colleges. The motivations of these students to enroll and persist at these institutions is also a topic worthy of academic explorations.

A question remains as to whether Evangelical-affiliated institutions would change their policies to better accommodate non-Christian students based on these findings, as doing so may stray from their explicitly Evangelical Christian missions. However, Evangelical colleges choosing to maintain the current course may be harming students at their institutions through their hostility. There is a pressing question as to what the priorities of these institutions are, and perhaps what they should be.

### **Institution Geographic Region and Urbanicity Influence Student Perceptions**

An unexpected finding from throughout the phases of the study related to institutional locations—both their geographic regions and the urbanicity of their settings. In Phase 1, there appeared to be a pattern between the urbanicity of institutions and how likely they were to have a religious accommodation policy, with city-based and suburban institutions being the most likely to provide a policy. Likewise, institutions in certain geographic regions – namely New England and the Southwest – also seemed to be more likely to have a policy. These patterns relating to both region and urbanicity continued to present in the Phase 2 analysis. Across all regression models, a number of regional variables were significant predictors, both positively (New England, Southwest) and negatively (Plains). Within Models 1 and 2, additional regions proved

to have significance, with institutional locations within the Mideast region having a significant positive association with student perceptions of welcome for those with a non-Christian worldview and students at institutions in the Rocky Mountains region having a strong negative association with perceptions of welcome for those with a non-Christian worldview. For the Phase 3 exemplar institutions, two of the five selected colleges came from each the Southeast and Mideast regions.

These findings by region are difficult to interpret but are undeniably significant. It is possible that more detailed explorations of student perceptions and policy quality conducting analysis by state—rather than by region—could better identify coherent patterns, as state-level policies and contexts may be influencing both of those elements. Additionally, given the small sample size of institutions within each region, it is possible that just a small number of exceptional institutions could significantly influence this study's findings by region. It is also possible that dependent variable student perception measures are reflecting student perceptions beyond just the campus climate, in which case the surrounding areas for the sampled campuses have to be considered as part of how the students responded, and could influence the findings by region or urbanicity.

Mutakabbir and Nurridin (2016) suggested that the spiritual well-being of religiously minoritized students is impacted by the urbanicity of their institutions, as they are less likely to be isolated from resources and communities for their RSSIs in more urban areas. The findings throughout this study supported that suggestion, as the likelihood that a college or university offered a religious accommodation policy seemed to correspond to how urban-leaning their urbanicity setting was in the Phase 1 findings, and the results of Phase 2's Models 1 and 2 indicated that students perceived more welcoming climates for non-Christian RSSIs at more



urban-set institutions. However, this doesn't necessarily account for the nuanced differences in the findings between different urbanities: is it simply a function of size that students at suburban institutions perceived a more welcoming campus climate than students at rural institutions, or is there more to these findings? Qualitative exploration of minoritized RSSI student perceptions by institutional urbanicity could shed light on why these differences in perceptions are presenting themselves, and potentially confirm Mutakabbir and Nuriddin's (2016) suspicion that this difference is attributable to proximity to resources and community in more urban areas. It is also possible that these findings reflect students reporting perceptions based on the politics of the areas surrounding their institutions, which could feasibly correlate with urbanicity. The lack of literature connecting either institutional urbanicity or geographic region to perceptions of a welcoming religious climate or institutional support for RSSI diversity means that there is much room for exploration and explanation surrounding the findings of this study – an area which is now open for scholarship.

### **Student Perceptions of RSSI Marginalization Reflected Other Axes of Power**

One of the most interesting findings from Phase 2 related to the various student demographic independent variables included in the models. A number of student characteristics beyond RSSIs were included in the four multilevel models, namely, first-generation status, international status, sexual orientation, race, and gender. Across the models, an interesting effect presented itself: despite the dependent variables specifically asking about institutional space support and welcoming for RSSIs, students who experience other forms of marginalization tended to have less favorable perceptions of their institutions, and students from the most privileged groups in each category tended to have the most positive perceptions of their institutions. For instance, within the gender variables, trans students perceived their institutions

more negatively across all models, whereas cisgender men viewed their institutions the most positively. The same effect presented itself in the race findings, with Native American students tending to report negative institutional perceptions across all models and White students more likely to view them positively. The pattern within the sexual orientation findings was more mixed, though heterosexual students, on average, perceived their institutions as more welcoming of non-Christians across Models 1 and 2. All other sexual orientations—with the noted exception of lesbians—tended to perceive their institutions as less welcoming to non-Christians within those same models. These patterns in the findings merit further academic exploration, but they also validate the importance that CRPT places on “embrac[ing] intersectional analysis” (Small, 2020, p. 63). There are patterns across forms of marginalization, even when the questions are focused on a single axis of oppression. Students are dynamic and cannot be fully separated into their component identities, which includes their RSSIs. It appears that there is perhaps a heightened awareness of power and privilege across the board that may tend to come with experiencing marginalization along multiple identity lines, which could prime non-Christian students from minoritized racial backgrounds, trans gender identities, or queer sexual orientations to be more aware of Christian hegemony. This awareness of Christian hegemony rooted in other forms of marginalization then manifested in observable patterns within the regression results of this study.

Future studies need to continue the work of including RSSI diversity within intersectional analyses of power and privilege within higher education, and in particular studies of student experiences and perceptions in accordance with CRPT’s Tenet 2. There are clearly connections and interactions between various RSSIs and other minoritized identities that are integral to fully understanding student experiences, which are hinted at within the findings of this study’s second

phase. Work like Park and Dizon's (2017) exploration of Asian American college student spirituality, Curley and Leon's (2018) coverage of spirituality among trans and nonbinary students, Means's (2017) counterstories of spiritual experiences of Black gay and bisexual male college students, and Snipes's (2017) study of Black atheists have all contributed to a stronger foundation for more fully understanding the dynamic landscape of how college student identities interact to shape experiences, but there are clearly further areas that merit explorations, particularly within smaller marginalized RSSIs.

### **Implications for Theory**

Two theories primarily guided this study: Cole and associates' (2020) minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate (MRSCC) framework and Small's (2021) critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT). The findings of the study have a handful of implications for both guiding theories. To begin, MRSCC's Dimension 1 predicted that "religious or faith-based institutions are likely to have a differential influence [on minoritized RSSI students' perceptions of religious campus climate] when compared to secular institutions" (Cole et al., 2020, p. 303). The findings of this study indicate that this was true to an extent, though more nuanced. First, the likelihood of a religious accommodation policy being present was shown to be statistically significant between secular and religious affiliated institutions. In other words, secular institutions were more likely to have a religious accommodation policy than Christian-affiliated institutions. However, the more detailed findings from Phase 2 indicated that Evangelical institutions in particular are associated with dramatically more negative non-Christian student perceptions of religious campus climate when compared to other institution types, which proved to be a statistically significant predictor across all four Phase 2 models. It appears that the most

prominent difference was not between Christian-affiliated and secular colleges, but particularly between Evangelical institutions and other institution types.

Dimension 5 of MRSCC predicts that when a higher education institution's organizational and structural features promote a positive religious and spiritual climate, Muslim students will have fewer experiences with insensitive peers on campus, less coercion to reconsider their worldview, and generally fewer negative interactions with others who have different religious, faith-based, and spiritual traditions on campus (Cole et al., 2020). This study found that religious accommodation policies as organizational and structural campus features did not predict higher perceptions of institutional space and support or campus worldview welcoming among non-Christians. This has a handful of implications on the theory. First, it is likely that not all structural and organizational features impact student perceptions and experiences equally, as some of these are inherently less visible than others. For instance, the construction of a religious life center on a campus would inevitably have a larger impact on student perceptions than a change in a religious accommodation policy, which a smaller number of students would see or experience. Second, it is possible that MRSCC is not as applicable to all minoritized RSSIs as it is for Muslims, as the foundations of the framework used a sample of Muslim students and subsequently proposed the theory as applicable to the greater population of all minoritized RSSIs. The theory could be modified to more appropriately acknowledge its basis on student perceptions, which are only able to reflect policies and practices that are directly perceivable by students. The applicability of the theory to non-Muslim, non-Christian groups could be further explored by a narrower, qualitative study of specific non-Muslim, non-Christian groups. For instance, it is possible that the theory applies well to Hindu students, but not as well to Buddhist

students, which would require a more direct study of those smaller – and largely unexamined – populations.

The findings of this study particularly reinforce the need for future applications of Critical Religious Pluralism Theory to critically re-examine higher education policies and practices for manifestations of Christian hegemony. In particular, the Phase 1 findings of proportionally how many institutions lacked religious accommodation policies—as well as the overall low quality of the policies that did exist—indicate that Christian hegemony is certainly a systemic issue within higher education in the United States, and that it is deeply engrained in policies and practices at these institutions, which echoes CRPT’s first tenet. Further, the specific finding that none of the analyzed policies acknowledged the dynamics of privilege and power between RSSIs indicates that Christian hegemony is largely unacknowledged and unchecked. This finding also emphasized the importance of CRPT’s Tenet 5: that higher education research, policy, and practice needs to consider marginalization, power, and privilege in relation to RSSIs (Small, 2020, p. 63). Other findings related to specific items on the Phase 1 scorecard—such as the lack of applicability of religious accommodation policies outside of the classroom and the frequent absence of appeals processes—further establish the need to expose inequitable elements of policies that are rooted in Christian hegemony in order to better support students. Tenet 2 of CRPT – which emphasizes the importance of an intersectional lens for the theory – is justified based on the findings of Phase 2 of this study, which found a heightened awareness of Christian hegemony among students with other minoritized identities. This effect should be further explored: do students with minoritized RSSIs have reciprocally heightened awareness of other forms of minoritization? Is this effect more heightened within specific minoritized RSSIs?

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Based on the findings from this study, mass renovation of religious accommodation policies is mandatory if higher education institutions are genuinely invested in pursuing equity and justice for students. Too many institutions have not explicitly stated their procedures in a policy, and more institutions have even codified unnecessarily inconvenient to potentially inequitably harmful elements into their existing policies. This study should serve, above all else, as a call to action for policymakers, student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty, and students to push for changes to religious accommodation policies within their colleges and states.

### ***Policymakers***

On both the institution and state levels, there is clearly a pressing need to re-evaluate the policies governing religious accommodations for college students, regardless of institution type, setting, or size. The widespread absence of religious accommodation policies exposed in Phase 1 of this study is unacceptable and is a problem that can be solved in part through state-level legislation. Some states already have laws that require higher education institutions within their borders to adopt religious accommodation policies that at least cover class absences for religious observances (Chapter UWS 22; Locallo, 2012; Student Religious Accommodations Amendments, 2021). While some of these laws only apply to public institutions, they can be binding on private colleges as well, depending on how they are composed (Smietana, 2019). The findings of this study indicate that private higher education institutions—even those that enroll non-Christian students—are not reliably providing religious accommodation policies, justifying legislation to assure a basic level of accommodation for students at all higher education institutions in a given state. Legislators should take note of the necessary breadth of state-level policies to effectively provide for the minimum needs of non-Christian students to practice on

college campuses within their states: they need to apply across institution types and have sufficient power and bearing to allow for more than just classroom absences for observances. For policymakers at both the state and institution levels, the scorecard provided in this study (Appendix A) can provide a guideline as to what a new or modified religious accommodation policy should or should not include based on the recommendations of literature. This scorecard was specifically designed to help inform and guide policymakers within higher education institutions and governments to assess and improve both existing and proposed religious accommodation policies for students.

Another potential benefit of the critical re-evaluation of currently enacted religious accommodation policies by policymakers is increased standardization. A notable finding of both this and other studies is that religious accommodation policies at higher education institutions vary widely from college to college in terms of their procedures, forms, and functions, with little standardization between them. Policymakers using the policy scorecard developed for this study can contribute towards establishing a coherent baseline for what these policies should cover across institutions and systems.

At the time of this writing, there is a wave of hostility within state governments targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, particularly within the setting of higher education. While this is highly concerning, there are still paths forward for advancing improvements to religious accommodation policies both within institutions and across systems, including actions as simple as modifying syllabi – which will be covered in more detail in future sections. As noted, policies can be established at the legislative or institutional level – the latter of which may be more fruitful ground in the current climate. However, religious accommodations can potentially have an appeal across the political spectrum, given the emphasized importance of religious practice

among political conservatives and the value placed on diversity and inclusion on the more progressive end of the political spectrum. Despite the current political hostility towards other forms of diversity, equity, and inclusion work by conservatives in the United States, the value they often place on religion and faith leaves some room for optimism for bipartisan religious accommodation policy reform at the state level, though efforts may still face significant opposition depending on the unique political landscapes of individual states. Regardless, internal institutional policy changes are more likely to gain purchase in the immediate future given they would not have to navigate the potential hazards of the political arena in the public eye. Additionally, there are a number of actions that individuals can take to help improve the landscape of religious accommodations and the overall experiences of non-Christian college students, which will be covered in the following sections.

### ***Student Affairs Professionals***

Student affairs professionals – including those working in the areas of religious life and diversity, equity, and inclusion – should note the findings of this study, as they have a key role to play in the improvement of religious accommodation policies. As student advocates within colleges invested in pursuing equity within their institutions and promoting a more positive campus climate, student affairs professionals are well-positioned to challenge structural barriers that impede student success at the institution level. Student affairs professionals can specifically push for implementations of improved religious accommodation policies, or question the execution of specific processes that might dissuade students from invoking religious accommodations. For instance, a student affairs professional can pose the idea of explicitly including an appeals process in their institution's religious accommodation policy – they are more likely than a student to know who to talk to about altering a policy, and are unlikely to



experience the same level of intimidation that has been reported from students who have to navigate such policies. Essentially, the role student affairs professionals can play in promoting campus changes for religious accommodations is to relieve the implicit pressure on students to instigate the changes themselves, as students are more likely to face negative consequences or experience intimidation as part of that process than their staff advocates.

### ***Administrators***

Beyond the realm of student affairs, other college administrators can also draw inspiration from the findings of this study. Institutional researchers, for example, can directly assess students' needs surrounding religious accommodations, and measure how effective their institutional policies are at serving those needs based on student perceptions. Higher level administrators such as Provosts can mandate the inclusion of religious accommodation policy information on course syllabi to make the processes clear to both students and faculty. Other administrators can lobby for the creation or modification of institutional religious accommodation policies based on the recommendations of this study, or instigate the creation of knowledgeable committees to manage religious accommodation requests in order to relieve the pressure on faculty and students to navigate the process.

### ***Faculty***

Faculty are often placed in positions of authority in the execution of religious accommodation policies, and thus have an immense amount of power over the process at most institutions. Based on the findings of this study, faculty need to be cognizant of the stresses that students experience in the process of requesting religious accommodations and take steps to make the process less laborious for their students. Regardless of whether it is required by their institution, faculty should provide information to students on the institutional process of

requesting a religious accommodation on their syllabi. Even at institutions without a policy, faculty can implement processes that specifically have bearing on their courses, and lobby fellow faculty members and administrators to implement an institution-wide policy. Faculty should also be careful not to express excessive scrutiny when a student requests an absence or other classroom accommodation for a religious observance, as the student may not feel comfortable disclosing the details of their practices due to stigma. In general, students seeking a religious accommodation should be trusted and not made to undergo any kind of verification process in order to be granted an accommodation, as this poses a disproportionate burden on non-Christian students.

### ***Students***

The findings of this study should empower non-Christian students to advocate for their religious accommodation needs. While many students avoid seeking accommodations due to the intimidation of the process or the social stigma of their beliefs and practices (Reed, 1998), this study has highlighted the extent to which current religious accommodation policies are not meeting their needs and has established that the problem is not unique to individual institutions. While the process of invoking a religious accommodation policy is often individually focused and isolating, the findings of this study should provide a level of comfort for students in knowing that they are not alone in their frustrations with institutional religious accommodation policies. While individual student voices may not be enough to instigate policy changes, collective voices carry a greater weight. Students frustrated with their institution's or state's policy can rally their peers to pressure for change. Alternatively, students can highlight the issues with policies by writing about their experiences in navigating them, as Juda (2018) did in the *Vanderbilt Hustler* student publication. However, as highlighted in the literature review, students utilizing religious

accommodations – or advocating for changes to them – run the risk of being ridiculed in the public eye or being put into conflict with professors in positions of authority over them (Bartlett, 2007; Grasgreen, 2010). This is why the onus for institutional change cannot solely rest with religiously marginalized students: it is crucial that policymakers, student affairs professionals, administrators, and faculty do their parts to promote changes to institutional policies as well so that the burden of change isn't entirely shouldered by students being directly impacted by those policies.

### **Limitations**

A significant limitation of this study was the different temporal contexts of the data collection between phases. Policies and other analyzed institutional documents used in Phases 1 and 3 were collected in December 2022 and January 2023, but the data collection for the quantitative analysis of Phase 2 was done in mid-2019. This three-year gap is notable. While some policies were explicitly dated—and could be verified to be current in 2019—many did not have evident dates associated with them. Between 2019 and 2022, institutions may have undergone changes in leadership or direction. In fact, two institutions in the initial sample of 122 in 2015 were closed by 2022, with another changing its name and a last one merging with another institution. Some states, such as Washington and Utah, passed new religious accommodation laws for their higher education institutions within that three-year gap, mandating updated institutional policies. It is possible that what was true of an institution from 2015-2019—when the surveyed students were experiencing it—may not be true to the same extent in 2022 and 2023.

Another limitation of this study related to Phase 1 in particular. It is possible that religious accommodation policies exist at some institutions that were not public facing and were

therefore marked as 0 on the Phase 1 scorecard. The reason that this was done was partially pragmatic, as I could not analyze documents I did not have access to. Furthermore, I was trying to mimic the actions of a student who was seeking an accommodation. If a student could not locate information about a policy using Google or the university's website, then it functionally did not exist from the perspective of that student. Having a policy that is difficult to find is notably as much a manifestation of Christian hegemony as an entirely absent policy, as it reflects the institutional neglect of non-Christian needs. Because of this, any policy that was not located will be treated as non-existent for this study's analysis, even if that information is not technically accurate.

The sample of institutions for this study was determined by which institutions were included in the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), from which the quantitative data for this study was derived. While the 122 institutions included in IDEALS were selected with diverse institutional characteristics in mind, that study deliberately included a handful of single-faith institutions. These institutions were particularly unlikely to have data from non-Christian students and were also highly unlikely to have religious accommodation policies. These institutions were by necessity excluded from most of the analyses in this study. For other institutions, the population of non-Christian students who participated in IDEALS was too small to meet traditional quantitative explanatory power. In total, of the 122 institutions initially included in IDEALS, only 121 were included in Phase 1 due to an institution closure prior to data collection, and only 112 institutions were included in this analysis of Phase 2 due to the lack of data for non-Christian students. For Phase 3, the 66 institutions without religious accommodation policies were not eligible for analysis, along with

institutions that did not have a minimum student respondent number of 15. This additionally trimmed down the pool of potential institutions for the final phase of analysis to 42.

Another limitation of this study is that the institutional sample excludes a notable and important institution type: community colleges. The state of religious accommodation policies at community colleges was briefly addressed in the study by Maples et al. (2021) but merits greater attention given both the number of students enrolled in these institutions and the equity concerns tied to the success of the many marginalized students attending community colleges across the country.

The number of higher education institutions in the United States – regardless of how they are qualified or counted – is easily multiple thousands. The sample of this study, as already mentioned, excludes community colleges, as well as other institutional settings like professional schools. For making conclusions about higher education at large in the United States, the institutional sample for this study – 122 – is somewhat small. However, that sample has been sufficient for providing a snapshot of the landscape, which previous analyses were not able to sufficiently provide. Future studies can narrow in their focuses for exploring specific institution types and settings, or even provide a more robust portrait of the entire higher education landscape of the United States using a larger and less limited institutional sample.

One of the substantive content theories for this study, the minoritized religious and spiritual campus climate framework presented by Cole et al. (2020), was written specifically about the experiences of Muslim students. These experiences realistically may not be perfectly applicable to non-Christians as a larger group. Muslim college students, for instance, do not simply suffer from navigating Christian hegemony. Rather, they exist in a cross-section of multiple axes of oppression, which can include Islamophobia and numerous forms of racism.

This study assumes there are some similarities between the experiences of Muslim college students and non-Christian college students, but also tests that assumption to a certain degree by design.

As noted in the literature review, part of the reason that little research exists on most marginalized RSS traditions is that they are individually often small populations on a campus. Thus, they often get lumped together for quantitative analyses to increase the explanatory power of those studies. However, the drawback is that findings on “others” or amalgamated “religious minorities” have limited implications or relevance for the individual groups within them, often rendering them invisible and widely unstudied. Unfortunately, this study also had to use amalgamated groups in the quantitative analysis of Phase 2 due to the small samples for many individual RSS groups in the IDEALS data, so groups like Jains, Pagans, and Secular Humanists were only included as parts of amalgamated groups like “Another Nonreligious Worldview” or “Another Minority Worldview.”

A last limitation of note for this study’s analysis is that not all non-Christians require religious accommodations. Therefore, many members of the study population may not be directly impacted by the content of these policies. For instance, the majority of the sample of non-Christian students used in this study identified as either Atheist, Agnostic, or otherwise Non-religious: a group that is less likely to need religious accommodations, and therefore less likely to interact with a religious accommodation policy. However, for the purpose of this study, the policy was not just its own text but was treated as a reflection of institutional values and commitment to worldview diversity. If a policy was more robust, it was speculated that it was a reflection of its institution putting more effort and consideration into religious and spiritual diversity. As a means of testing this assumed connection, the policy scorecard developed in

Phase 1 of the study was compared with the themes identified within the policies, characteristics, and facets of positively viewed institutions by non-Christian students in Phase 3. Ultimately, the differences in the Phase 3 findings and the Phase 1 scorecard highlight the many facets of a campus that can reflect institutional priorities beyond policies, including curricular offerings and co-curricular programming. While functionally important for many students with minoritized RSSIs, religious accommodation policies are not necessarily a holistic reflection of an institution's values and priorities around RSSI diversity.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are a number of areas for future research that are evident based on this study. First, an exploration of the state of religious accommodation policies at community colleges—an important institution type excluded from this study—is a pressing need. Community colleges represent a large number of students across the country, and student success at these institutions has immense equity impacts. Additionally, given the relatively small samples by region in this analysis, a study that emphasizes either a more robust focus on specific regions or a focus on state-level analysis would help to better elucidate the state of religious accommodation policies within specific regions and could provide more context for the findings of this study.

Another area that merits exploration are the many state-level laws focused on student religious accommodation policies at universities. These laws have not been specifically explored academically or meaningfully compared to each other. However, it is clear that the content of these pieces of legislation varies based on how they manifested in the policies examined in this study. It is also clear that many states do not have them, based on how many institutions do not have a stated policy. A cataloging and analysis of these laws could expose equity issues in their composition that are trickling down into institution-level policies within those states.

The process of conducting this study exposed another needed area for research: the differential experiences of non-religious, atheist, agnostic, and secular students based on their religious socializations. The data used in this study only asked demographic questions about student RSSI identities, so there was not a way to determine what RSSI students were socialized or raised with. This issue was previously highlighted by Edwards (2021), who described the importance of this religious socialization element when looking at the experiences and perceptions of identified nonreligious students. The experiences of currently nonreligious students who were raised within minoritized RSSI traditions would almost certainly be markedly different than those of nonreligious students raised in a Christian tradition – those who are culturally Christian – given their proximity to and relative experiences with Christian hegemony. Not only is this a needed area for research, it is also a needed practice change. There is utility in collecting data on religious socialization alongside religious identity in order to provide detail and context for students under the frequently-used amalgamated “nonreligious” and “none” demographic categories, given the power dynamics involved with being raised within or outside of a religiously majoritized group.

The markedly lower perceptions of support and welcoming from non-Christian students attending Evangelical institutions merits further qualitative exploration. For instance, it would be helpful if the motivations of non-Christian students choosing to attend Evangelical institutions were better understood. Likewise, documenting how they navigate the landscape of these deeply Christian campuses would offer some insights into how students manage and cope with existing on the oppressed side of pronounced religious power dynamics on campus.

Another area that clearly requires more research are the experiences of students from smaller-population minoritized RSSIs. As has been true of many studies, this study had to omit a



number of smaller RSSI groups from the quantitative phase of the analysis by grouping them together into an aggregate, which contributes to the invisibility of many of these RSSI groups—including Pagans, Jains, and Sikhs—within higher education. Given the relatively small populations of these groups, student-centered qualitative analyses of the experiences of these minoritized RSSIs are likely the best avenue to better describe and highlight these students' often-neglected experiences within higher education.

While this study's third phase of analysis sought to identify patterns between institutions with particularly high non-Christian student perceptions of institutional support and welcoming, a future study could take the same approach to identify patterns between institutions with uniquely low non-Christian student perceptions: essentially anti-exemplars. It is possible that there are relevant qualities or practices that are common between these institutions that can provide additional context as to why non-Christian students don't perceive those campuses as welcoming or supportive. Such a study could offer valuable guidance for improving the content of campus programs and services, and generally promote more positive campus climates for non-Christian students.

Another potential focus for a future study would be to explore how religious accommodation policies at universities are actually created. While it appears that some are at least influenced by state-level legislation, it is unclear who actually writes the policies for individual institutions, nor who is necessarily consulted in the process. Part of the work of improving these policies will be providing a clearer understanding of how they come to be, possibly through interviews with high-level administrators who can describe the considerations that go into crafting a policy.

Lastly, future studies can further explore influences on student perceptions. A hypothesis surrounding this study's findings is that the lack of visibility of religious accommodation policies for a majority of students meant that the quality of those policies was unlikely to influence overall student perceptions – essentially, visibility is necessary to influence perception. This takeaway can be tested with future studies to see if visible elements of a campus have a greater influence on student perceptions than invisible, behind-the-scenes structural elements.

### **Conclusion**

This study has indicated that religious accommodation policies at colleges today are largely insufficient to meet the functional needs of students from minoritized RSSIs and pose a serious issue of institutionalized inequity. The finding that so many institutions failed to even provide such a policy is of further concern, given the neglect of non-Christian needs that their exclusion—or invisibility—represents. While the presence and quality of religious accommodation policies were not associated with higher student perceptions of institutional space and support for spiritual expression or campus welcoming for non-Christian RSSIs, this does not undermine the importance of improving the landscape of religious accommodation policies to better serve the functional needs of non-Christian students. State-level policymakers should re-assess their current higher education religious accommodation laws based on the findings of this study and seek to improve the minimum requirements for institutional policies within their purview. At the institutional level, colleges that do not have religious accommodation policies should adopt them, taking note of the recommendations from literature. Institutions that do have a religious accommodation policy should reassess their policy documents as written using the provided scorecard to identify potential areas for improvement.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Phase 1 Religious Accommodation Policy Scorecard

## Religious Accommodation Policy Scorecard

	Y/N
Does the institution have an evident religious accommodation policy for students?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is an appeals or grievance process outlined in the policy in the case of a denial or obstruction of accommodation?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy identify a committee or staff member who is responsible for arranging religious accommodation requests (so a student doesn't have to directly approach a professor or authority figure to request accommodation)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy omit a signed verification or sincerity of belief attestation statement?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy omit a requirement for any form of proof of belief or affiliation in order for a student to receive accommodation?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy apply to needed religious accommodations outside of the classroom setting (dietary accommodations, prayer space needs, etc.)? (2 points)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy allow a student to submit a religious accommodation request without having to directly declare their religious, secular, or spiritual identity to an authority figure?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is a specific office or department identified as being responsible for overseeing the student religious accommodation policy?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy acknowledge Christian privilege, note the existence of power dynamics between religious traditions, or acknowledge the importance of religious diversity for the institution?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the policy omit the following ambiguous legal phrases: 'undue hardship,' 'sincerely held,' and 'reasonable accommodation'?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Add the number of Ys to calculate the policy's score out of 11