

# To combat hate and discrimination, colleges should teach religious tolerance

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Schools and colleges should train employees and students regarding religious tolerance and acceptance. CECILIE\_ARCURS Getty Images Gandhi wrote, “The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of devotees of the different religions.” As incendiary rhetoric, hate and religious discrimination spread amid the tragic Israel-Hamas conflict, it’s time for colleges to teach religious tolerance and acceptance.

Nearly six in 10 (55.8%) of college students have completed diversity, equity and inclusion training, according to a recent Anti-Defamation League study, while other research shows two-thirds of faculty have done so. But most schools and colleges do not train employees and students regarding religious tolerance and acceptance.

Fewer than one in five college students (18.1%) in the aforementioned ADL survey reported they had participated in a religious acceptance training such as an antisemitism lesson. Since May, the federal government has intensified calls for colleges and schools to do more to protect people of faith.

The White House and the U.S. Department of Education have launched campaigns for colleges to offer religious acceptance and anti-discrimination training and offered educational resources. Incidents of religious hate and violence continue to spike.

Antisemitic incidents on college campuses have risen 700% since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, driving the total number of reported instances of hate to more than 900 between 2019 and February 2024, according to Hillel.

From October to December 2023 alone, Muslim civil rights groups recorded nearly 3,600 complaints regarding anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian incidents, a 178% rise from a year ago, according to The Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Most young people, however, have trouble even identifying religious discrimination. Consider a 2021 study by the American Jewish Committee. It found over half of Americans between 18 and 29 years old, the biggest college age bracket, could not define “antisemitism,” and another study indicated that 22% of millennials knew little to nothing about the Holocaust.

Americans are often just as clueless about discriminating against other people of faith, including Muslims and Sikh men, who have long faced prejudice, suspicion, violence and fear when they have been conflated. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that 52% of Americans know “not much” or “nothing at all” about Islam, despite Judaism, Christianity and Islam being Abrahamic religions. Half of Americans also do not personally know anyone Muslim. The only means to stop hate are communication and education. To see the shoes of Nazi victims is a way to imagine walking in them at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. — 4,000 loafers, booties, heels and so on – piled hauntingly high. To meet and speak with someone different increases trust. Non-Muslim Americans who know a Muslim are more likely to have a positive view of Muslims and less likely to think Islam promotes violence more than other religions, Pew research found. Other studies show that simply reading a literary novel — a work of fiction! — about different people builds empathy and understanding.

So, imagine the good that would come from colleges formally teaching people religious acceptance. Colleges already educate new students on everything from how to avoid unsafe situations with intimacy and alcohol to other types of anti-discrimination training. But college administrators took decades to comply with the VI and IX portions of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which eventually birthed diversity, equity and inclusion training. So, it’s no surprise colleges have been slow to adopt training to discourage discrimination against people of faith, despite 20 years of federal reminders that Title VI and IX also extend to religious categories.

As smoke billows above Gaza, one fact remains clearer than the Red Sea: In America, where 82% of Gallup poll respondents say they are religious or spiritual and 47% are pious, true academic inclusion training means both embracing our sameness as a people of faith and celebrating our differences. David A. Armstrong is the president of St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens. The university’s Interfaith Leadership Institute is developing and implementing training for employees and students to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia and foster religious acceptance, drawing partly on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s educational curriculum.