

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



(Unsplash/Noah Holm)



by David A. Armstrong

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

June 5, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The adjective "catholic" means "all-embracing," "open-minded," "tolerant" and "unprejudiced," according to the American versions of the Oxford English Dictionary and Thesaurus, oft-described as "[the bible of the English language](#)."

Such qualities are in short supply, as the tragic Israel-Hamas conflict claims lives and incendiary rhetoric spreads. Now more than ever, colleges and universities should embrace teaching religious tolerance and acceptance.

In [Romans 14:1-4](#), Paul writes, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand." Although Paul was encouraging unity among Christians with conflicting ideas and opinions, his guidance offers a framework to respect people of other faiths.

[Paul reasoned](#) that all believers are just trying to honor God, who wants community and unity, and only God is qualified to judge people when their day of reckoning arrives. Colleges, secular and religious, already use diversity, equity and inclusion training to celebrate differences.

Religious acceptance training on college campuses would highlight both Americans' religious differences and our shared faith, including the 82% of [Gallup poll](#) respondents, who are religious and/or spiritual, and the 47% who are religious.

But while nearly six in 10 college students (55.8%) have taken a diversity, equity and inclusion course, fewer than one in five college students (18.1%) have completed training about antisemitism, according to a recent [Anti-Defamation League study](#). (Around [43% of faculty](#) must complete diversity training, other researchers found).

Most diversity training, however, [does not include](#) interfaith literacy lessons. College faculty and students urgently need such religious acceptance training as violence and anger metastasize. As of May 31, 2024, Hillel International had chronicled 1,664 antisemitic incidents on college campuses — a [700% increase](#) over the same period last year — since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel.

Advertisement

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim civil rights group, [documented](#) a record 8,061 hate complaints against Muslims in 2023, nearly half of which occurred in the final three months of 2023.

Yet, many young people struggle to even identify religious discrimination. More than half of the 18- to 29-year-old Americans [polled by the American Jewish Committee](#) in 2020 said they could not define "antisemitism."

[Another study](#) in 2018 showed that 22% of millennials had not heard of or were unsure if they had heard of the Holocaust. And Americans are often ignorant about others of faith, especially Muslims and Sikhs, who have been conflated and [tragically targeted](#).

More than half of Americans (52%) admitted they know "not much" or "nothing at all" about Islam, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), even though Islam, Judaism and Christianity share Abraham as a prophet. Pew's research also revealed that half of Americans [do not know anyone who is Muslim](#).

Colleges already teach students about diversity, equity and inclusion, and the importance of avoiding unsafe behaviors involving sex, drugs and drinking. Now, colleges should communicate and educate students and employees about religious acceptance.

Familiarity is a powerful requisite for empathy. [Various research](#) has documented how getting to know others increases empathy and reduces aggression. Another [body of research](#) indicates that merely reading fiction about different people can build empathy.

[A Pew study found](#) that non-Muslim Americans who know a Muslim are more likely to have a positive view of Muslims. To see the 4,000 loafers, booties, heels and other shoes of Holocaust victims [heaped hauntingly high](#) at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., is to envision walking in them.

Since May 2023, the [White House](#) and the [U.S. Department of Education](#) have launched campaigns and offered educational resources for colleges to teach religious acceptance and anti-discrimination training. The federal government has spent [20 years reminding colleges](#) that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which [birthed DEI training](#), and Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, also

cover religious categories.

In the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 7:1](#)), Jesus declared, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." God is the only judge we need. But Americans often harbor contempt and even hatred for those who do not share their faith, politics and lifestyles. Religious acceptance training can help people see the danger of disdain and division and the power of community and unity.