

Improving Campus Climate for Students of all Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identities: The INSPIRES Index as a Best Practice in Chaplaincy

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Abstract: There is an urgent need for RSSI-focused assessment tools that generate actionable data to guide institutional change. The INSPIRES Index emerges as a vital, free resource for this purpose. This paper examines how the Index empowers chaplains to lead campus-wide initiatives that support students across a diverse spectrum of religious, spiritual, and secular worldview identities.

Keywords: Campus Climate; RSSI; Assessment; Sense of belonging; INSPIRES

Context

Assessment in higher education functions as a systematic process for gathering and interpreting information to improve educational quality.¹ When applied to college campus climate, assessment moves institutions beyond anecdotes toward credible, disaggregated evidence about whether students experience the environment as inclusive, respectful, and supportive, and helps identify the gaps that persist across groups and campus units. Importantly, the value of assessment lies not in measurement alone but in closing the loop: linking results to concrete changes in policy, practice, and resource allocation, followed by reassessment to evaluate whether those changes improved conditions.²

Campus climate assessment is particularly consequential because climate is multidimensional and shaped by both interpersonal experiences and structural conditions.³ Climate can capture

¹ Banta, Trudy W., and Catherine A. Palomba. *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014; Suskie, Linda. *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

² Ewell, P. T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement. *NILOA Occasional Paper, 1*.

³ Hurtado, Sylvia, Kimberly A. Griffin, Lucy Arellano, and Marcela Cuellar. "Assessing the value of climate assessments: Progress and future directions." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 1, no. 4 (2008): 204; Rankin, Susan R., and Robert Dean Reason. "Differing perceptions: How students of color and white students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups." *Journal of college student development* 46, no. 1 (2005): 43-61.

students' sense of belonging, perceptions of fairness, exposure to bias or discrimination, and confidence that institutional processes (e.g., dining services, advising, support services) are accessible and responsive. Hurtado et al. (2008) argue that campus assessments are most useful when they integrate (a) indicators of climate perceptions and experiences, (b) documentation of institutional practices and interventions that structure those experiences, and (c) student outcomes that reflect learning, engagement, and success. This integration helps institutions, and the chaplains they employ, identify not only whether inequities exist but also which institutional conditions may be producing them, creating clearer targets for improvement.

Assessment also matters because campus climate is linked to student retention and graduation through the conditions it creates for belonging, academic and social integration, engagement, and students' willingness to seek support.⁴ Persistence research has long emphasized that students are more likely to remain enrolled when they experience supportive relationships and perceive the institution as committed to their success.⁵ Scholarship on student success highlights that educational environments that foster engagement through supportive advising, meaningful involvement, and effective teaching are associated with beneficial outcomes, including persistence.⁶ In this way, climate assessment is not separate from hard metrics such as retention and graduation; rather, it may help chaplains explain why those outcomes vary and which levers institutions can use to improve them.

The Problem: The Need for an RSSI Assessment

Arguably, higher education assessment has largely overlooked how institutional structures, policies, and practices shape the campus climate for students with diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs). This gap became particularly evident after the events of October 7th, 2023, when college campuses realized how ill-prepared they were to identify and respond with appropriate supports for their students.⁷ Without a systematic approach to RSSI assessment, chaplains may struggle to identify where climates are welcoming or exclusionary, pinpoint policy or structural barriers, and prioritize evidence-based improvements. Therefore, an RSSI-focused assessment is needed to generate actionable data that can guide institutional change, strengthen student support strategies, and equip religious and spiritual life staff with credible, data-driven metrics to inform advocacy, budgeting, and resource allocation.

⁴ Culver, K. C., and Nicholas A. Bowman. "Are You Experienced?: How College Environments, Programs, and Interactions Shape Student Retention, Persistence, and Graduation." In *Improving College Student Retention*, pp. 153-181. Routledge, 2023.

⁵ Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt. *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

⁷ Mayhew, Matthew J, Benjamin Selznick, and Musbah Shaheen. "Addressing Campus Antisemitism Is A Now Or Never Moment For DEI." *Forbes*, December 21, 2023.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewmayhew/2023/12/21/addressing-campus-antisemitism-is-a-now-or-never-moment-for-dei/>; Haddad, H., Gill-Morris, A., Creamer, E., & Mayhew, M. (in press). *INSPIRES: An Index for Reducing Institutional Polarization*.

A Best Practice for Chaplains: The INSPIRES Index

To address this problem, we propose a best practice for chaplains to assess how welcoming a college campus is for students of different RSSIs: the Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Campus Climate Index (INSPIRES Index). Launched in 2021, INSPIRES is a free survey tool that went live in the 2021-2022 academic year as a collaborative effort between Drs. Matthew J. Mayhew (Ohio State University) and Alyssa N. Rockenbach (North Carolina State University).⁸ The INSPIRES Team drew the criteria for each survey item from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS survey)⁹, which examined what made students from over 120 campuses with diverse RSSIs feel at home on campus.

INSPIRES asks institutional representatives to complete one survey annually (see Figure 1). In return, they receive a comprehensive, data-driven scorecard that assesses their institutional efforts to create a welcoming campus climate for students across different RSSIs within the following seven domain areas: Religious Accommodations, Institutional Behaviors, Efforts to Reduce Negative Engagement, Extra-curricular Engagement, Space for Support and Expression, Institutional Structures, and Academic Engagement.

The types of questions asked in the INSPIRES survey have helped illuminate shortcomings and areas for growth across campus units. For example, among the over 300 institutions that completed INSPIRES between 2021 and 2024, only 20% of institutions offered specific training to address bias at the institutional level.¹⁰ These numbers then skyrocketed to over 45% in the 2025 iteration of INSPIRES, whereby partner campuses updated their results, indicating improvement in this area. Thus, the coverage INSPIRES provides by assessing the campus environment as a whole, while considering discrete aspects such as training, can promote targeted changes that collectively make a significant impact across campus units.

INSPIRES= Informed by IDEALS data

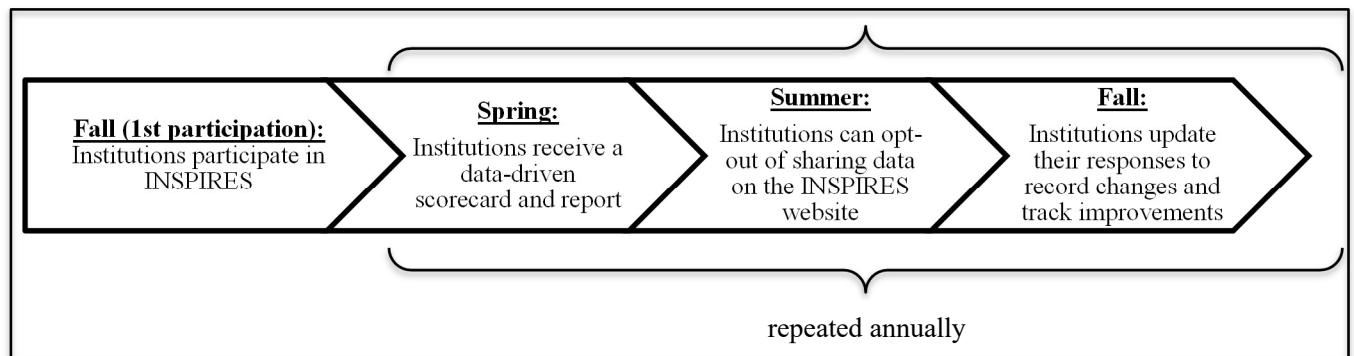


Figure 1: INSPIRES Participation Timeline

⁸ Mayhew, Matthew J, Alyssa N Rockenbach, Musbah Shaheen, Christa Winkler, and Laura S Dahl. *INSPIRES Index Technical Report*. INSPIRES Index, 2025. <https://www.inspiresindex.org/>.

⁹ IDEALS. Interfaith America, 2020. <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/ideals/>.

¹⁰ Selznick, Benjamin S., Matthew J. Mayhew, Christa E. Winkler, Musbah Shaheen, and Alyssa N. Rockenbach. "Developing college students' Jewish appreciation: A four-year mixed-methods study." *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 6 (2024): 1177-1211.

Impact on Students and Chaplains

To illustrate the impact made on his campus from using the INSPIRES Index, Andrew Cirrilo, University Chaplain at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), shared: “[INSPIRES] acts as an instrument of collaborative energy between spirituality and religious life, student activities, counseling, access and belonging, and even segments of upper administration within each higher education institution. Overall, a lot can be learned and acted upon to effect positive change in levels of student belonging and comfort”. As aforementioned, improvements in student belonging have broader benefits for their retention and graduation from the institution¹¹. Thus, insights from RIT suggest that INSPIRES will help cultivate a more welcoming campus climate for students with diverse RSSIs, which could improve student belonging and attract more students who are more likely to persist in pursuing their degrees.

Furthermore, the direct changes resulting from INSPIRES participation were described by another university chaplain, who said that after completing the Index, “We made updates to the Office of the Chaplain website, such as publicizing the names of nearby halal/kosher restaurants.” This change is particularly meaningful for students, since thoughtful improvements to dietary accommodations enable them to express their religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs positively and will allow them to eat with their friends of the same or different faith traditions.¹²

One additional chaplain shared that after completing the INSPIRES Index, their institution has worked to “fine-tune policies related to religious practice and expression and has included RSSI more holistically in other areas of campus”. This testimony highlights the Index's broad reach in informing campus-wide changes.

By providing chaplains with a data driven INSPIRES scorecard, they are informed in a way that moves beyond anecdotes to identify the most pressing gaps that exist across campus units. This removes the guesswork when making targeted improvements, ensuring students are supported in ways that are necessary and important. Making carefully considered changes in this way removes the stress many institutions faced as they scrambled to support students with different RSSIs after October 7th, 2023.

Limitations

To support chaplains in making an informed decision about using the INSPIRES Index, we have considered several limitations. Firstly, the model and structure for participation in the Index are built on institutions updating their responses annually, which may be a limitation given the narrow time it leaves for institutions to implement changes between surveys. Thus, we propose to chaplains that they update as frequently as makes sense for their unique institutional needs and timelines. Secondly, because only one member of an institution is required to take the INSPIRES

¹¹ Mayhew, Matthew J., Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Nicholas A. Bowman, Tricia AD Seifert, and Gregory C. Wolniak. *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

¹² “Religious Accommodations and Policies on Campus (Examples).” Interfaith America. Accessed February 16, 2026. <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/resources/religious-policies/>; Karlin-Neumann, P., & Sanders, J. (2013). Bringing faith to campus: religious and spiritual space, time, and practice at Stanford University. *Journal of College and Character*, 14(2), 125-132.

Index, there is a risk of incorrect reporting. Thus, we recommend that chaplains establish a stakeholder group to leverage shared expertise and complete the survey collectively. Finally, we appreciate that for assessment to be effective, the results must be linked to tangible changes in policy, practice, and resource allocation. However, this can be challenging amid growing budget constraints and limited resources at colleges nationwide. Therefore, we advocate that chaplains use the INSPIRES Index to identify the “low-hanging fruit” and the easiest changes to implement first, so the improvements do not feel overwhelming or financially impossible.

Takeaways and Questions to Ponder

There is a strong need for institutions to assess how welcoming their campus climates are for students with diverse RSSIs, to improve student outcomes, and identify persistent gaps across campus units. Since there is no alternative measurement tool that offers the insights provided by the INSPIRES Index, it holds an undeniable advantage as a current best practice in chaplaincy. Thus, moving forward, we urge chaplains to consider how they could benefit from an assessment tool focused on RSSI and to further explore implementing the INSPIRES Index on their campus.

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