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Faith-based dialogue on a public university campus

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I. Introduction

This study, “Promoting Religious Literacy at Public/Single Faith Universities: Adapting Models for Interfaith Dialogue While Expanding Research Paradigms” surveyed Utah State University students to ask them,

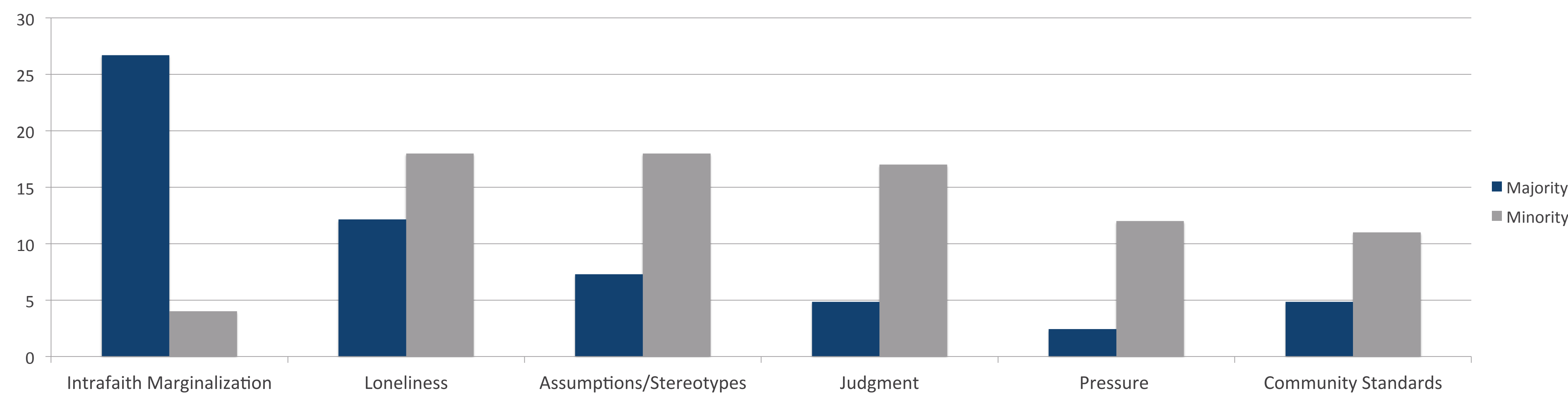
- What role does religion have on a public university campus?
- How is faith-based dialogue viewed on a campus where LDS students are the religious majority?
- How do individuals who orient around religion differently interact with one another?
- Can interfaith initiatives at USU improve student relationships?

II. Methods

The authors conducted 30-60 minute, open-ended interviews with students to learn about their religious/faith backgrounds, their tolerance of and familiarity with other religious traditions, pressures they perceive from those of their own or other religious traditions, and desires for change. Our snow-ball sample,

- Consisted of 42 (14 female, 28 male) students, ages 18-57
- Represented 14 different religious traditions (Figure 2)
- Included all levels of study (bachelors, masters, and PhD students)

Table 1- Religious Majority and Minority Challenges



III. Results

Analysis of interviews indicated 7 basic themes including *intrafaith* marginalization, loneliness, assumptions/stereotypes, judgment, pressure, and community standards (see Table 1).

Religious majority (LDS) students commented on:

- Feeling marginalized when they did not conform to LDS cultural norms.

Religious minority (non LDS) students spoke of:

- Feeling isolated or segregated if they chose not to convert to the majority religion

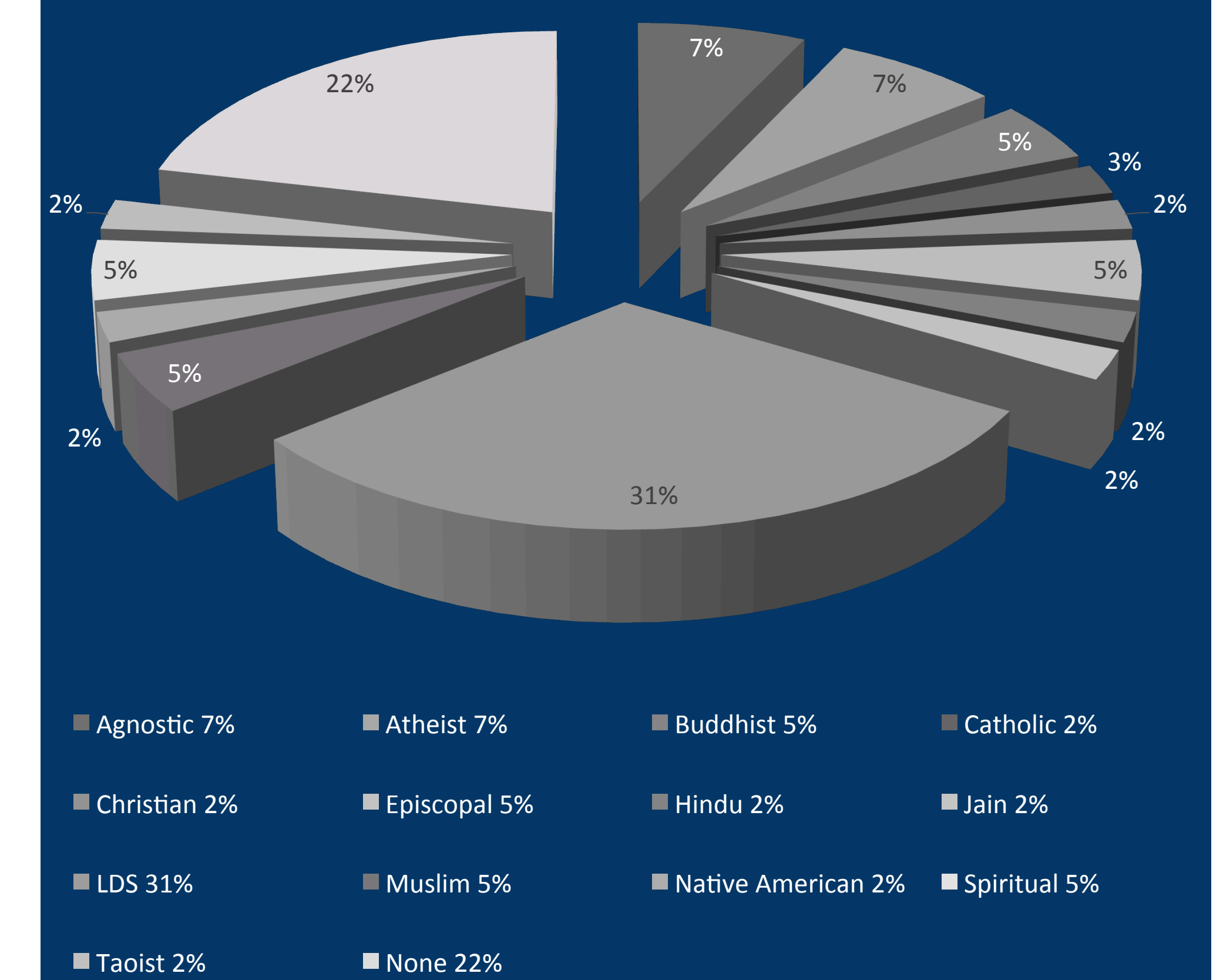
- Being dropped as friends by LDS students who unsuccessfully tried to convert them.
- Feeling that they had to be “in the closet” about their religious identities to avoid social discrimination.

Many study participants expressed a desire to have more faith-based dialogue on campus. They commented that discussions, seminars, and panels about world religions, about their religious convictions, and about those of their peers would help increase religious literacy while creating a more welcoming atmosphere for all students on the USU campus.

Figure 1 – “Speed-Faithing” as Faith-Based Dialogue



Figure 2 – Religion Demographics



IV. Conclusions

Current literature suggests that students expect colleges to meet spiritual, as well as academic, emotional, and physical needs. This study suggests that USU students want more discussion of religion on campus, but that religious majority and religious minority participants both feel pressured and misunderstood. There is an atmosphere of “us versus them” on campus. Faith-based dialogue is an important tool for overcoming these challenges.

Newly instituted “speed-faithing” events (Figure 1), where students briefly share their deeply held faith commitments with their peers in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation provides one example of faith-based dialogue which can help build more positive relationships on campus.

