

Nonbelievers find niche at California Lutheran

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

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Evan Clark chose to attend California Lutheran University even though he wasn't sure how he might fit in as an atheist at a religious school. But when Clark, now 23, and a handful of other students sought to establish a nonbelievers' club, they were approved by both student government and the administration, despite the school's affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

"The mission statement of the university is to further faith and reason," Clark said. "They are very open to communicating about religion, to not saying 'it is my way or the highway.' So we fit right in with that mission—that we are going to talk about matters of faith so you will be stronger in your beliefs."

The Cal Lutheran chapter of the Secular Student Alliance started in 2009. It is now one of the most active clubs on the campus in Thousand Oaks, California, joining other groups for events based on both faith and nonbelief.

With a Catholic group, club members visited a Catholic church. They celebrated a Jewish holiday with a Jewish group. They have visited a Sikh gurdwara and a Mormon temple and discussed Wiccan and Unitarian Universalist beliefs with members of those faiths.

"What I appreciate most about the group is its willingness to explore what makes believers tick," said William Bersley, one of the group's faculty advisers. "This aspect of tolerant inquiry

into faith and compassionate service seems to belie the more monstrous caricatures of atheists."

Not everyone is so impressed. Campus pastor Scott Maxwell-Doherty said when the SSA was allowed to use the chapel to host an atheist speaker, some religious students felt a line had been crossed. "We said we've got to work at this together," he said of the decision to approve the group. "Because if you are going to go out there in the world, you have to understand the bandwidth."

Clark has heard from students at other religious schools where officials have not embraced nontheistic student clubs.

"They are losing out on an opportunity for positive dialogue with people who have different views," he said. "It blows my mind that some campuses would not allow this. If we did this with a Muslim group or a Jewish group, it would be blatantly wrong, but with nonbelievers it is OK? That is sad." —RNS