

The Religious Engagement of First-Year Students at Protestant Colleges

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First-year students at Protestant colleges and universities participating in a recent study reported stronger religious affiliations and higher levels of religious involvement than their peers at other institutions of higher education. Not surprisingly, students attending religiously-affiliated colleges in general indicated that they are more religiously affiliated and engaged than their peers at public or non-sectarian private institutions (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2003). The strength of these orientations may, however, surprise many in higher education, even those serving on religiously-affiliated campuses.

For decades, the academy was disinterested in, if not hostile to, the religious and spiritual needs of students (Burtchaell, 1998; Marsden, 1994; Sloan, 1994). Results from this study, however, provided further evidence that students entering higher education are more religiously engaged than in recent years, suggesting that a religious revival may be occurring among today's young adults (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Hartley, 2004; Lee, 2002; Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, & Youniss, 2000; Nash, 2001). Nationwide, 81.9% of first-year students indicated that they had attended a religious service during the year immediately preceding their entrance to higher education (Sax et al., 2003). For students at the institutions participating in this study, the comparable number was 91.0%.

The purpose of this study was to examine the religious engagement of first-year students at 12 institutions of higher education related to The United Methodist Church, the nation's second largest Protestant denomination. Study methodology and results are presented along with recommendations for campus program and policy.

Methodology

This study examined the religious identities and activities of first-year students attending a dozen United Methodist-related colleges and universities. The Undergraduate Experiences Study (UES) conducted by researchers at Vanderbilt University under the sponsorship of The United Methodist Church included a sample of 1,410 randomly selected first-time, full-time students. Of the 2,513 surveys distributed in the late fall of 2002, 1,747 of the instruments were returned, yielding a response rate of 69.5%. Although 27 of the 89 four-year institutions related to the denomination initially expressed interest in the study, only 12 elected to participate. Data were analyzed using descriptive frequencies, factor analysis, and bivariate correlations. Aggregated, unweighted results from the UES were compared with results from the annual national study of first-year college students conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles (Sax et al., 2003). Results from the fall 2002 CIRP survey were obtained from over a quarter of a million students attending more than 400 colleges and universities across the country.

The gender breakdown of the sample of 1,410 students was nearly 2 to 1 female (63.8%, $N = 900$) to male (36.2%, $N = 510$). Almost two-thirds of the sample was White/Caucasian (62.6%, $N = 883$), with Black/African-American students making up 31.0% ($N = 437$), and the remaining 6.4% ($N = 88$) students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Slightly less than a third of the students (29.2%, $N = 412$) attended the three Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs) participating in the study, while 70.8% ($N = 998$) attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). When examined by Carnegie Classification, three-fifths of the students (59.8%, $N = 843$) attended Baccalaureate General Colleges (7 institutions), one-fifth (21.4%, $N = 302$) attended Baccalaureate Liberal Arts Colleges (3 institutions), 7.7% ($N = 108$) attended the one Masters I university, and 11.1% ($N = 157$) attended the one Doctoral Intensive university in the study. The geographic breakdown of the sample by region of the country is as follows: 63.4% ($N = 894$) of the students attended schools in the Southeastern U.S., 18.9% ($N = 266$) in the Southwest, and 17.7% ($N = 250$) in the Midwest.

Results

This study provided some of the most descriptive information of student religious engagement on church-related campuses to date and offered support for the attractiveness of these denominational colleges to students of faith. Study results indicated that three times as many Methodist students (United Methodist and “Other Methodist” combined) attend the 12 United Methodist-related colleges when compared with the national average of all four-year institutions in the CIRP survey (20.2% vs. 6.0%). These denominational colleges also attracted nearly three times as many Baptist students (32.6% vs. 11.6%), though almost one-third the number of Roman Catholic students (11.7% vs. 30.1%) when compared to the national sample. More than half of the students in this study (52.4%, $N = 739$) stated that they considered themselves to be “born again” Christians. Furthermore, students attending United Methodist-related institutions were less than half as likely to state no religious preference when compared to the national sample (7.2% vs. 17.2%). Almost half as many students in the UES sample indicated affiliation with non-Christian religious traditions (3.9% vs. 7.5%), suggesting that there

was less religious diversity on the United Methodist-related campuses participating in the study than the national average.

High School Senior Year Activities. In addition to reporting more frequent attendance at religious services, the students in the UES study also reported higher levels of other religious activities during their high school senior year. Nearly three times as many students at these United Methodist-related institutions discussed religion and spirituality when compared to the national CIRP sample (86.6% vs. 30.5%).¹ Eighty-seven percent spent time in prayer verses 65.2% of their peers in the national sample. The UES surveyed students were also more likely to indicate that they had performed volunteer work (90.6% vs. 82.6%). In addition, the UES study examined other aspects of religious engagement not previously studied. Three-fourths (75.5%, $N = 1064$) of students taking part in the study indicated that they had participated in a religious youth organization their senior year in high school, with 46.1% ($N = 650$) indicating that their involvement was frequent or very frequent.

Important Life Objectives. The students in the Vanderbilt study were three times as likely as their peers in other colleges and universities to indicate that strengthening their religious beliefs and convictions was an important life objective (81.2% vs. 26.0%). These same students were twice as likely as students in the CIRP sample to value developing a meaningful philosophy of life (83.3% vs. 40.6%) and integrating spirituality into their lives (80.8% vs. 41.5%). The measures of religious engagement for the sampled students attending United Methodist-related institutions were also higher than comparable measures of their peers who attended similar religiously-affiliated colleges and universities. Nearly one-third (32.8%, $N = 463$) of the students in this study indicated that the religious affiliation of the college was important in their choice to

¹ While the UES survey inquired about the frequency of discussing religion and spirituality, the CIRP survey inquired about discussing religion only.

enroll at the institution, compared to 5.9% of students attending all four-year institutions and 29.2% attending religious (non-Catholic) institutions in the CIRP sample.

First Semester Activities. After entering college the sampled students attending the 12 United Methodist-related colleges and universities indicated a slight decline in their religious involvement. This finding is consistent with results from other studies (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Despite these declines, their overall religious commitments remained strong. Near the end of their first semester on campus, three-fourths (77.0%, $N = 1085$) of the students indicated attending a religious service, a decline of 14%. Four out of five students (79.3%, $N = 1118$) had spent time in prayer or meditation, a decline of 7.7%. Additional measures of first-semester religious engagement indicated that 57.0% ($N = 803$) had read or meditated on sacred or religious writings. Two out of five students had taken part in an on-campus religious organization, with 34.9% ($N = 419$) taking part in off-campus religious organizations. More than four out of five (82.1%, $N = 1158$) had discussed religion or spirituality with their peers on campus, while slightly fewer than half (46.0%, $N = 649$) had discussed these matters with their professors. A quarter of the students (26.0%, $N = 367$) reported that interactions with campus chaplains were important to them. Overall, 67.6% ($N = 953$) of first-year students at these 12 United Methodist-related colleges and universities indicated that they were satisfied with on-campus opportunities for religious and spiritual development.

Students at HBCUs. Consistent with findings from other studies (Sax et al., 2003), the students attending the three HBCUs exhibited slightly higher measures of religious interest and involvement when compared to the students at the other campuses in this study. While the percentage of those attending religious services during the previous year was nearly identical

(92.5%, $N = 381$ at HBCUs vs. 90.4%, $N = 902$ at PWIs), more HBCU students valued integrating spirituality into their lives (88.1%, $N = 363$) than those at non-HBCUs (77.8%, $N = 776$). The students attending United Methodist-related HBCUs also reported higher levels of religious interest and involvement than their peers at other HBCUs across the country.

Additional Findings

Factor analysis resulted in the construction of three religious engagement scales: pre-entry engagement, fall engagement, and fall strength of faith. The Pre-Entry Religious Engagement scale ($\alpha = .8769$) consisted of five items measuring frequency of involvement in such activities as attending religious services and time spent in prayer or meditation during the senior year of high school. The Fall Semester Religious Engagement scale ($\alpha = .8560$) was constructed with six items paralleling pre-engagement activities with the exception that participation in both on and off-campus religious groups was measured. The Fall Strength of Religious Faith scale ($\alpha = .8661$) incorporated six items assessing strength of religious beliefs and such goals as the importance of integrating spirituality in life and developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

Bivariate correlation analysis revealed that students who performed volunteer work in high school and those who considered themselves to be “born again” were the most likely to be religiously engaged their first semester in college. African-American and Baptist students were somewhat more likely to be religiously engaged. Methodist students and those religiously engaged their senior year in high school were also more likely to be religiously active on campus. Overall, male students were less likely to indicate religious involvement their first semester. Contrary to findings of other recent studies (Bryant et al., 2003; Cherry et al., 2001;

Sax et al., 2003), students in this sample reported little distinction between being “spiritual” and being “religious.”

Students who indicated higher levels of religious engagement their first semester of college were more likely to report the importance of their interactions with chaplains and campus ministers. Additionally, these same students were more likely to be satisfied with campus opportunities for religious and spiritual development. They were also more likely to indicate the importance of the college’s church affiliation to their choice to enroll.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was that the sample was drawn from 12 colleges and universities that were not randomly selected. While the characteristics of these dozen United Methodist-related colleges and universities are broadly representative of the 89 four-year institutions of higher education related to the denomination, study results are not generalizable beyond the participating schools. Furthermore, nine of the 12 institutions were located in the south, suggesting a strong regional bias. Another limitation was the measuring of pre-entry characteristics and activities with a mid-fall survey. Intervening campus experiences can bias such retrospective assessments.

Recommendations for Campus Program and Policy

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations were made for campus religious life programming at the institutions participating in this study. Other colleges and universities may find merit in these recommendations if campus conditions and culture warrant.

- *Campuses are encouraged to develop programs and opportunities to meet the strong student interest in religion and spirituality.* Perhaps more so than in recent years, students

attending the campuses in this study were keenly interested and involved in these matters. Intentional campus efforts to address these needs are likely to result in continued student satisfaction.

- *Campus programming need not shy away from being overtly religious.* Students in this study did not think of themselves as being more “spiritual” than “religious”. While attention should be made to address the diversity of needs represented among students on individual campuses, the tendency toward programming on some campuses that addresses “spiritual” but not “religious” needs was not warranted for the campuses in this study.

- *Campuses are encouraged to foster student interactions with peers regarding matters of religion and spirituality.* As with other aspects of campus life (Astin, 1993), peer involvement is a critical component to students’ religious and spiritual development. Although student interactions with peers was more significant than interactions with faculty in this study, some campus contexts may be appropriate for encouraging greater faculty involvement as well.

- *Campuses are encouraged to develop a more intentional outreach to male students.* Not only did female students outnumber males two to one in this sample, they were also more likely to be religiously engaged. Specific opportunities targeting male students would likely result in their greater participation.

Additional recommendations were offered for campus policy at United Methodist-related colleges and universities. These recommendations may also have merit in other institutional settings.

- *Institutions are encouraged to highlight their commitment to moral, spiritual, and religious values in their promotional materials and presentations.* Nearly a third of the students in this sample indicated that the religious affiliation of the institution was important to their

choice to enroll. Over all, four-fifths of the students expressed a desire to strengthen their religious beliefs and integrate spirituality in their lives. Expressing campus commitments to support these values should resonate well with many prospective students.

- *Institutions are also encouraged to highlight opportunities for campus religious life in their promotional materials and presentations.* Recognizing that more than three-fourths of students in this study participated in religious activities in their senior year of high school and that a majority continued those activities in college suggests that informing prospective students of these opportunities may be an important recruitment strategy.

- *Institutions are encouraged to utilize churches, especially youth groups and events, in their recruitment activities for prospective students.* Although this study did not specifically address recruitment activities, the strong involvement of students in religious activities during their high school senior year merits consideration of this strategy. Furthermore, with nearly half of the students indicating frequent or very frequent participation in their church youth groups, targeted recruitment activities may be particularly efficacious.

- *Institutions are encouraged to provide strong support for their chaplains and campus ministers as well as for campus religious life programs.* Students who were religiously engaged expressed great appreciation for the role of campus clergy. Overall more than two-thirds of students indicated satisfaction with religious life opportunities. Strong institutional support for both religious personnel and programs will likely foster high levels of student involvement and satisfaction.

Conclusion

While students attending church-related colleges may be expected to indicate that they are more religiously affiliated or engaged, the results from this study indicated that the strength

of these relationships was particularly strong at the intuitions taking part in this study. Protestant colleges and universities are in a unique position to capitalize on the growing interest among college students in matters of religion and spirituality. The institutions participating in this study attracted students who are more religiously engaged than their peers at other institutions, and were meeting the expectations of these students once they arrived on campus. In so doing, these colleges and universities provided a great service to their students as well as to the denominations they represent.

Questions regarding study results, or requests for correlation tables, description of variables, or samples of the survey instrument should be directed to Harold V. Hartley III, doctoral candidate, Vanderbilt University at harold.v.hartley@vanderbilt.edu.

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Table 1. Select United Methodist College Freshman Responses and National Comparisons for Fall 2002
(student responses in percentages)

Survey Item	United Methodist Study ^a			CIRP National Norms by Institution Type ^b				
	All (N=1410)	PWI (N=998)	HBCU (N=412)	All 4-Yr. Colleges & Universities	All Private 4-Yr. Colleges	Religious (non Catholic)	All HBCU	Private HBCU
Current religious preference:								
Methodist	20.2	24.6	9.4	6.0	5.7	8.1	6.5	7.4
Baptist	32.6	25.5	50.3	11.6	12.7	20.5	52.1	49.9
Roman Catholic	11.7	13.7	6.9	30.1	29.0	13.5	5.7	10.4
Other Christian	24.3	25.6	21.1	26.8	30.2	43.8	22.1	21.4
Other Religion	3.9	3.2	5.8	7.5	7.6	5.2	6.5	4.5
None	7.2	7.5	6.6	17.2	15.0	9.0	7.2	6.4
Activities during past year prior to entering college:								
Attended a religious service	91.0	90.4	92.5	81.9	84.3	91.3	93.0	95.2
Discussed religion and spirituality ^c	86.6	85.5	89.3	30.5	35.3	44.4	35.8	40.6
Performed volunteer work	90.6	90.2	91.5	82.6	85.2	86.3	81.8	88.3
Spent time in prayer ^d	87.0	84.8	92.5	65.2	70.4	81.8	89.5	91.7
Very important life objectives:								
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	83.3	81.2	88.6	40.6	42.7	41.6	52.2	55.7
Integrating spirituality into my life	80.8	77.8	88.1	41.5	49.4	62.1	68.0	76.0
Strengthening religious beliefs and convictions ^e	81.2	78.3	88.4	26.0	34.8	48.9	44.6	51.3
Influencing student's decision to attend this college								
Religious affiliation/orientation	32.8	32.7	32.8	5.9	16.0	29.2	6.6	9.9

^a Source: Undergraduate Experiences Study data conducted by researchers at Vanderbilt University under the sponsorship of the General Board of Higher Education & Ministry, The United Methodist Church. Based on responses from 1,410 first-time, full-time, first-semester students randomly selected at 12 United Methodist institutions. PWI = Predominantly White Institutions (N=9). HBCU = Historically Black Colleges and Universities (N=3).

^b Source: *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. Based on responses from 282,549 first-year students attending 437 4-year colleges and universities. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program is an annual national survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

^c The CIRP survey: "discussed religion" only.

^d The CIRP survey: considered those who indicated spending some time in prayer during a typical week.

^e The CIRP survey: "chances are very good that [student] will strengthen religious beliefs/convictions."