

CCCU RESEARCH SERIES

THE CCCU AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR STUDENTS:

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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About this Issue of the CCCU Research Series

The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities has been studying issues associated with the moral and spiritual development of our students throughout most of our history. In the last few years there has been renewed interest in the study spawned by a variety of events and circumstances. The M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust has provided two grants that have supported our peer group of campus ministry professionals in their quest to better understand the role of campus ministry in the overall work of our campuses in spiritual formation, and with that knowledge we are seeking to improve the campus ministry programs on our campuses and the professional development of campus ministry personnel.

There continues to be tremendous interest from accrediting and regulatory entities concerning assessment of institutions' successes in achieving their mission. The Council's mission statement contains the phrase ". . . to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth." We believe that statement is a reflection of an aspect of the mission statements of many if not most of our member institutions, which in some way convey the concept of a transformative mission emanating from the Christ-centered nature of our campuses that will positively impact students in terms of their moral and spiritual development. The question naturally arises then, "How are we doing in fulfilling that mission?" The answer lies in determining as best we can just how well our institutions are doing in the moral and spiritual development of their students.

The Council has loosely identified a research agenda strategy that seeks to determine if we can come to some general agreement on a core definition of spiritual development. Because our membership encompasses nearly thirty denominations and many religiously independent institutions, we represent a very broad theological grouping that is united in its commitment to being Christ-centered. With our diversity we realize that agreeing on a core definition of spiritual formation will be a major challenge and may require a minimalist approach. A core definition would give us a benchmark for comparative data among our campuses and a base on which individual schools of various theological traditions could add elements consistent with their theological understanding, and could over the years gather longitudinal data to help improve and strengthen their work in this area.

If we can come to a common agreement on a core definition, then a second phase of the research agenda would use the core definition to identify member campuses representing several different theological traditions with mature programs of spiritual formation that appear to be achieving positive results. We would work with those campuses to prepare a guidebook describing their approach and program to make that available to help other schools of a similar theological background with a less mature or effective program.

With a core definition and having identified mature programmatic approaches to implementing the definition successfully, we would seek to create assessment instruments for the core definition. The assessment instrument would enable the Council to gather comparative data useful to our member campuses and for the Council's public advocacy work. The core assessment instrument would be structured to allow individual campuses (or denominational groupings of campuses) to add additional assessment questions/components to assess the elements they have added to the core definition to reflect their theological background or unique institutional elements. This would provide individual member campuses both with annual benchmarking comparative data as well as longitudinal data on their own assessment elements.

The Council has received a grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust that will enable us to hold a workshop of presidentially-led campus teams to explore this proposed research agenda with a special focus on the first phase – the development of a core definition. In preparation for this workshop and pursuit of this proposed research agenda, the Council began exploring the history of our own work and the work of others in this area. We secured the assistance of a wonderful volunteer, Dr. John Harris, with extraordinary credentials in the field of assessment who agreed to assist the Council on this project.

We secured a grant from the CIOS Foundation that allowed us to hold a Roundtable of assessment experts to explore this concept and to suggest further steps in the formation of a research agenda on spiritual formation, particularly on the assessment aspect. Dr. Randy Lowry, President of Lipscomb University, graciously agreed to host the Roundtable event at his institution in Nashville on October 27, 2008, and the meeting was led by Dr. Harris. One of the results of this Roundtable was the suggestion that the Council undertake a meta-analysis of research on spiritual formation. Again, with a grant from the CIOS Foundation to support the project, we enlisted Professor Mark Regnerus at the University of Texas at Austin along with Charles E. Stokes, a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at Austin. The original intention was a quantitative meta-analysis of quantitative articles, but the researchers did not identify sufficient comparable findings across studies to obtain meta-estimates and the decision was made to focus on a literature review and analysis.

We are grateful for this report and believe it will be an important building block in our ongoing research agenda on spiritual formation. We acknowledge with appreciation all those who have contributed to the success of this project with special gratitude to the CIOS Foundation for their generous financial support.

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The CCCU and the Moral and Spiritual Development of their Students: A Review of Research

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Christian colleges and universities experience a more challenging environment today than ever before in which to convince prospective students and their parents that a Christian higher education offers something distinctive, valuable, and worth their investment. In previous eras, accounts of hostile professors and “Animal House” imagery at secular universities were enough to steer many Christians in the CCCU direction, at least those who could afford the comparatively higher price of a private education. But both the college experience and college goers have changed. Mounting evidence indicates that public universities may no longer be the “faith killers” they were once believed to be. And with financial pressures squeezing families’ college funds, Christian colleges and universities feel poignantly the need to clearly and convincingly articulate the value added by their distinctive approach.

Among the most important missions of Christian higher education are facilitating the moral and spiritual development of students. While these twin priorities are increasingly on the agenda at many nonreligious universities, instilling values, encouraging ethical behavior, and supporting religious practice have *always* been central to the mission of Christian colleges. As a result, Christian universities *should* have more coherent policies, practices, and programs facilitating moral and spiritual growth, well-developed community networks to nurture and sustain students’ religious vitality, and years of practice honing these parts of their mission. But do Christian schools actually produce better moral and spiritual outcomes for their students?

In this report, we evaluate research from the last 20 years¹ in order to answer three sets of questions:

- 1) Do students from Christian colleges develop spiritually and morally at a more rapid pace than do students who attend public and nonreligious private schools? Are they more regular in religious practice and more consistent in moral behavior?
- 2) What specific practices are effective in promoting moral and spiritual development? What practices support religious practice and moral behavior?
- 3) What kinds of research should be conducted in the future to better assess the impact of Christian higher education on moral and spiritual development? On religious practice and moral behavior?

Overall, we find consistent evidence that students from Christian liberal-arts schools exhibit higher levels of moral and spiritual development and more faithful attendance at religious services than do students from other institutions. This bright news for Christian colleges is dimmed, however, by the realization that Christian schools appear to be the best at clearing a relatively low bar. It’s possible that students from Christian universities do better morally and spiritually simply because they attract and recruit the kinds of students who are already inclined to pursue spiritual growth and follow religiously prescribed behaviors. Moreover, the mechanisms by which Christian colleges may actually stimulate moral and spiritual development are woefully underspecified. Below, we review the research on moral and spiritual development which suggests that, while Christian schools are doing comparatively well at supporting the moral and spiritual development of their students, there is much room for improvement, both in assessment and practice.

¹ We began our investigation by collecting recommendations of exemplary research from a group of senior administrators from the CCCU Forum on Spiritual Formation. Using these articles as the starting point, we collected other related studies from the last two decades. Except where otherwise noted, we limited our search by focusing on studies that included an identifiable sample of CCCU schools and especially to those that compared CCCU schools with other schools. We had hoped to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis of our set of quantitative articles, but there were not enough comparable findings across studies to produce reliable meta-estimates.

Developmental Outcomes

Moral Development

Religious and secular schools alike have been concerned with the moral development of students. As stakeholders from multiple perspectives, they have an interest in encouraging prosocial moral thinking and behavior. A host of initiatives and assessments, then, have been advanced by universities to promote the kind of progress that has been variously called character, values, moral and/or ethical development. Much of the assessment in this regard has centered on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg proposed a multi-stage theory in which persons move from *conventional*, rule-based thinking to *principled* thinking, which is situational, rational, and considerate of multiple perspectives. A number of psychometric instruments have been developed to measure development using Kohlberg's theory, but the most frequently used, by far, is the DIT or Defining Issues Test (Rest 1986). The DIT asks respondents to rate how certain they are about various responses to five moral dilemmas (Rest 1986).

Some scholars suggest that elements of traditional Christian culture may tend to keep young adults "frozen" in conventional thinking, a central element of which is support for existing social orders (e.g. Getz 1984, Hickerson and Laramee 1976). One study in particular finds some evidence for this, when out of 322 students at a public university, conservative Christians scored lower than average on the DIT (Clouse 1985). Others assert that the additional emphases placed on moral thinking and behavior at Christian universities is helpful in pushing students *toward* more principled moral reasoning. Which assertion, then, is more true?

Though the average adult is thought to remain in conventional moral reasoning all her life, there is evidence that college attendance in general encourages movement up to the principled level, wherein students begin to think more critically about society and its values (Pascarella and Terezini 2005). Two small studies specifically measured shifts along the DIT scale among two groups of students, one at a Christian liberal-arts college (N=44) and one at a Bible college (N=54). The students were tested as freshmen and then again as seniors (Shaver 1985, 1987). The students at the Christian liberal-arts college displayed higher-than-average DIT scores as freshman, while the Bible college students were lower than average. Because Kohlberg's theory (and the DIT) are based heavily on cognitive development, the discrepancies between the freshman groups' scores might be explained by differences in admissions selectivity between the two schools (the liberal-arts school was highly selective; the Bible college was not). But the author of the study also notes that the students at the liberal-arts college displayed considerable *growth* in DIT scores between their freshman and senior years, while the Bible college students actually exhibited a slight decline.

How do students at Christian schools fare when compared with students at nonreligious schools? One study that compared three CCCU schools against a national sample found considerable variation in both the initial scores and in growth among the three CCCU schools but noted that the average freshman scores and average growth of the CCCU schools were similar to those of the national sample (Buier et al. 1989). Two other studies compared Christian liberal-arts, Bible college, and public university students on the DIT (Good and Cartwright 1998; McNeel 1991). Both studies revealed that Christian liberal-arts college students finished their studies with the highest average DIT scores, followed by public university students, and then students at Bible colleges. A recent reanalysis of one of those studies confirmed its conclusion (Pascarella and

Terenzini 2005). Finally, a fairly comprehensive meta-analysis of moral development in college reports that students from Christian liberal-arts schools scored highest on the DIT (King and Mayhew 2005).

So do Christian colleges produce better moral-development outcomes than do other institutions of higher learning? We assert that the evidence is mixed—but certainly leans positive. Studies with stronger research designs are needed before more decisive conclusions can be offered. Christian colleges may simply attract the kind of students who are inclined to score well on the DIT (which is to their credit). These students not only start high on the DIT but consistently exhibit growth during their college years at Christian schools. This growth, however, does not appear to be appreciably better than what takes place at public universities.

Christian Bible college students, on the other hand, fare more poorly on the DIT. Not only do they start lower, they also fail to grow during their years in college. This may indicate an unsupportive climate for growth in moral development (at least of the sort that is captured by the DIT). The pattern exhibited by students at Bible colleges is important for another reason as well. Their lag suggests that the growth exhibited by other students is not simply an artifact of aging or life-course transitions, nor of attending college *per se*. Subsequent studies would have to determine just how different the Bible college experience is from other kinds of college experiences. We can safely surmise, however, that there are positive benefits of a wider Christian liberal-arts education not actualized in a Bible college atmosphere.

We must keep in mind, however, that the DIT is not intended to be a measure of *Christian* ethical and moral development. Consequently, some valid questions have been raised about possible biases in Kohlberg's theory and in the DIT specifically. Our stance is that the theory is a helpful guide for our purposes, since regardless of its specifically religious relevance, the DIT is the most common of such empirical indices in current use. Still, its possible shortcomings are worth mentioning here.

Gilligan (1982) contends that moral development differs for men and women and that Kohlberg's theory privileges a male model of development. If Gilligan is correct, then her contention may mean that studies using the DIT underestimate the positive moral development taking place on the majority-female CCCU campuses.

Other scholars assert that the DIT is *biased* against conservative Christians, because respondents who indicate that they resolve moral dilemmas by following God's laws or biblical principles are scored at lower levels of moral reasoning (Dirks 1988 gives a summary of this argument)—regardless of whether or not these laws and principles would themselves be judged as morally advanced. If concerns about anti-Christian bias are correct, they may help explain the lower scores of Bible college students.

Dirks (1988) argues against the bias theory, claiming that students will fare worse at schools that fail to promote reflective thinking, stimulate cognitive dissonance, and/or communicate the reasoning behind strict standards of conduct. Further studies are needed to determine if Bible colleges in fact exhibit the negative mechanisms Dirks suggests or if bias is largely to blame.

Finally, some scholars (e.g. Darley and Batson 1973, see also Holcomb 2004 p. 28 for a full discussion) find Kohlberg's theory to be a poor predictor of actual moral behavior; they remind us that there is little evidence that those who achieve advanced stages in Kohlberg's framework also consistently exhibit prosocial behaviors.

Several studies have explored the mechanisms that might support or retard moral development in college. Mechanisms that were found to be the most influential should serve as foci for future studies. Though no studies have yet distinguished these mechanisms between CCCU and non-CCCU schools, two meta-analytical studies using the DIT suggest that liberal-arts curriculums, service learning, low density, diverse peer networks, frequent interactions with faculty, and various specific interventions (such as courses or seminars specifically addressing morality) all contribute to growth in students' moral development (King and Mayhew 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Involvement with Greek organizations appears to have a negative effect on moral development, although the Greek effect may largely be a function of the high density and closed networks characteristic of these organizations. Studies of involvement in intercollegiate athletics have been inconclusive (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), though one isolated study (Beller 1995) suggests that moral interventions are less effective for student athletes in team sports (e.g. football) than for those who compete in individual sports (e.g. golf). Much more study is required to specify the mechanisms by which colleges influence moral development.

New studies are needed to better account for the selection of students into various types of colleges as well as to evaluate the specific ways in which growth in moral development is facilitated. Most studies conducted thus far have no precollege measures or contain only a few retrospective measures at all. An ideal study would follow students for an extended time, measuring their responses before they entered college and continuing to monitor them throughout college and into their lives afterwards. Studies of this kind are expensive, though. And the few large-scale studies in progress that fit the design either lack measures of moral development, aren't large enough to include students from Christian colleges, or (usually) both. A more realistic—and perhaps equally useful—approach would be for individual colleges to administer a short form of the DIT to a sample of their applicants and then track a sample of their own students through college with short surveys and /or interviews that measure specific moral-development pathways. These results could then be compared with similar studies from other types of institutions. In this way, CCCU students could be compared to (1) similarly devout Christians at public universities, (2) students at other CCCU schools, and (3) themselves as they change over time. Such data would yield useful evidence about whether the institutional context of colleges—and CCCU colleges in particular—actually makes a causal difference in students' moral development.

Ethical, Values, and Character Development

From high-profile business scandals to exasperating disciplinary hearings over academic dishonesty, universities of all kinds have reasons to be concerned with the ethical development of their students. Christian colleges may have an advantage in promoting ethical development, especially as public universities are hard pressed to elaborate coherent moral principles in support of ethical behavior when they tacitly espouse moral relativism in other areas of their curriculum.

A review of several studies of ethical development among college students noted that a “Christian worldview” was consistently associated with more ethical responses (Barbee 2004). Another noted that highly religious students were more likely to respond ethically (Longenecker, McKinney, and Moore 2004); specifically, Evangelicals and students who reported that religion is very important to them were the most likely to give ethical responses among the sample of 1,234 students. One particularly relevant study compared students from Christian colleges to those from other schools. In this study of 490 students, students from evangelical colleges were less likely than students from Catholic or public schools to say they would compromise ethical standards (such as falsifying records or violating company policies) when responding to situations posed in moral vignettes (Kennedy and Lawton 1998). The authors found no significant differences between the responses of highly religious students from public universities and those from evangelical colleges. Evaluated together, these studies seem to indicate that the observed advantage of evangelical colleges may be due to their higher concentration of devout students (although there is much room for further investigation).

Moving to the somewhat more generic area of values or character development, a number of studies have investigated institutional differences as well as mechanisms. One excellent study employed sophisticated methodology and data from the massive National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to investigate character development within colleges (Kuh and Umbach 2004). It concluded that students from religiously affiliated schools, liberal-arts schools, and students in Greek organizations score highest in character development. In another study, George Kuh—who is widely considered the guru on assessing values development in college—explored whether college *environments* matter (2000) for character development. Kuh tentatively concluded that denominationally affiliated liberal-arts schools, especially members of the CCCU, appear to create environments where students grow in character above and beyond what would be expected from the students’ own intrinsically motivated efforts. Certain factors create pro-character cultures, and these cultures are frequently found at denominational liberal-arts schools. Specifically, Kuh (2000) highlights as useful for character development (1) university missions that emphasize character, (2) attention to the holistic development of students, (3) consistency of pro-character orientations in the policy and curriculum of the school, (4) intentional socialization of faculty, staff, and students to value high character, (5) the availability of peers who share values, and (6) ongoing assessment of the efficacy of character-development initiatives. In short, values are best developed in a *powerful, conforming culture of character*.²

² One small note from Kuh’s 2000 review that is of particular interest to CCCU schools is the modest evidence that chapel services promote character development; this appears, however, to be largely the result of chapel services being naturally found in schools that have a comprehensive set of pro-character development elements.

There is one other notable stream in relation to character and values development: the movement to develop assessment tools that move beyond generic liberal values to evaluations of particular understandings of character and value. One example of this is the Character Assessment Survey (CAS) developed by Schmidt (1983) at Spring Arbor College (Underwood et al. 1996). The CAS evaluates eight specific elements of biblical character, but replaces theological terms to make the instrument more flexible. The DePaul Values Inventory (DeVI) is another example; this one is designed to specifically assess students' growth in areas related to the mission of DePaul (Filkins and Ferrari 2004). The Mission Perception Inventory (MPI) is another example, to be used in conjunction with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) so that schools can assess how students are understanding and integrating the mission of the school into their lives (Boylan and Wakahiu 2009). The MPI has largely been used by Catholic schools but may also be helpful to CCCU schools. Finally, the Taking Values Seriously (TVS) project was sponsored by the CCCU (Baylis and Longman 2007). This ambitious project involved data collection and sharing among several CCCU schools and utilized both institutional and national data. Some of the findings from TVS were compiled in reports which are cited elsewhere in this document, though much of the benefit of TVS was realized in facilitating data collection at the level of individual institutions. The data-collection pathways established by TVS will doubtlessly benefit future efforts in this vein.

Faith and Spiritual Development

There has been considerable recent interest in both popular and scholarly circles about the spirituality of college students. "Spiritual" usually connotes those elements of religious life not associated with institutional practices, and some have asserted that many college students are "spiritual but not religious" (see Smith and Snell 2009 for the latest research on this topic among young adults). But long before the recent interest in spirituality, James Fowler developed his theory of faith development, which suggests that all humans develop spiritually and in a manner which can be divided into measurable stages. Fowler's theory—while aptly criticized for emphasizing a "generic" faith biased toward mainline Protestant religion—has nevertheless attracted the attention of many Christian educators (see Dykstra 1986, Holcomb 2004 p.15). We can certainly learn from its use.

A number of small studies have been conducted using Fowler's interview and scoring method. One notable study developed a quantitative instrument to measure faith development and found that students at one CCCU school exhibited growth in faith development during their time in college (Cureton 1989). The most ambitious data-collection project to date employing Fowler's theory is the Faithful Change project partially sponsored by the CCCU and conducted by Gay Holcomb. Faithful Change involves hundreds of interviews at multiple schools and includes a panel component where students are interviewed during each of their four years in college. A cross-sectional comparison of 102 freshmen and 49 seniors who were interviewed in the first round of Faithful Change interviews reveals that seniors score one faith stage higher than freshmen, on average (Holcomb 2004 p.66). Some faith-developmental growth is taking place among students at CCCU schools, then, though it is unclear how much (if any) of this growth is attributable to the CCCU college experience. One recent report on the project revealed that *crisis* is a key predictor of growth in faith among students (Holcomb and Nonneman 2004). Such crises usually entail exposure to new ideas or persons who bring new perspectives and cultures that challenge the respondents' old notions of faith, God, and the world. Crises can also take a more traditional form as difficult circumstances introduce emotional turmoil.

At present, the promising longitudinal component of the Faithful Change project has not been completed, but we note that its cross-sectional findings dovetail with those of a study of the correlates of spiritual “struggle” in college (Bryant and Astin 2008). This study's authors found that students attending religious colleges were more likely to experience spiritual struggle, which—as noted above—may be profitable for faith development. They indicate, however, that spiritual struggle is associated with lower levels of psychological well-being and that students who are experiencing spiritual struggles seldom perceive that they are growing spiritually. Genuine, sustained faith development may necessarily be problematic and come only after struggle (Holcomb and Nonneman 2004), and its effects may well be difficult to perceive except in hindsight. (The life accounts of many esteemed Christians would bear out this perspective.) The Faithful Change report (Holcomb 2004 p.134) also recommends that CCCU schools nurture a “greenhouse” environment that can help students grow both by introducing diverse perspectives that lead to struggle and by providing support for students while they experience the resultant (and other) crises.

Fowler's paradigm is not the only one guiding assessment of spiritual growth. Others include Malony's Religious Status Interview, Bassett's Shepherd Scale, Moberg's Spiritual Well-Being Inventory, and Paloutzian and Ellison's Spiritual Well-Being Inventory. Each of these is more oriented toward specific orthodox Christian forms than is Fowler's more generic measure of faith, but they are less developmentally oriented and may measure more dynamic—and less linear—spiritual processes. Individual institutions should pay careful attention to specific elements of their own faith traditions and pilot several different instruments before settling on a way to measure spiritual development of their students (Lynn et al. 2001).

To summarize, research on faith and spiritual development fails to provide a clear answer to our core questions about how Christian schools compare with other institutions and which mechanisms produce desirable outcomes. There is some tentative evidence that spiritual struggle is an important part of faith development. The Faithful Change project represents a promising direction in faith development research. It might be fruitfully extended to evaluate students in nonreligious schools and could also be combined with cutting-edge techniques like Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for spiritual development. Clearly, specific institutions will have to wrestle with how well Fowler's paradigm can be used to evaluate their students' faith.

Behavioral Outcomes

Religious Practice

The psychosocial elements of moral and spiritual development are important aspects of the spiritual health and well-being of students, but a related and more visible element is religious practice. Of course, some people practice religion outwardly but evidence little maturity or growth inwardly. Others may have vibrant inner lives but are irregular in their practice. Typically, though, inner spiritual and moral vitality corresponds with outward religious practice and moral behaviors. Christian college and universities are especially concerned with the religious practices and moral behaviors of their students. Secular universities are, of course, much less concerned about such matters. Thus, we might expect that Christian schools do a better job of supporting the religious practice and moral behaviors of their students. But do they? Below we review key studies on the impact of college on religious practice (mostly attendance) and then follow with a brief look at the impact of college on moral behaviors.

Many continue to believe that the modern university is a breeding ground for apostasy and that Christian students are religiously “safer” in Christian colleges. This was a common understanding until the mid-1980s, when James Hunter, a prominent sociologist at the University of Virginia, found evidence that evangelical students maintained their faith better at state schools than at evangelical schools (Hammond and Hunter 1984). Hunter asserted that the diverse, religiously challenging environments at public universities caused some evangelical students to “close ranks” and maintain their worldview and commitments while students at evangelical schools became lax, living beneath a “sacred canopy” that didn’t require effort or exercise. One can imagine the consternation at evangelical schools with Hunter’s findings.

Responses to Hunter’s research, however, have not supported his conclusions. In 1994, Calvin College sociologist Rodger Rice reviewed several objections to Hunter’s methodology and highlighted findings from two projects that contradicted his findings. One was a dissertation which used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and Follow-Up Survey (Railsback 1994). It compared “born-again” students at CCCU schools to similar students at other institutions and found that CCCU schools had a much lower percentage of students who dropped their born-again self-identity than other schools had (6 percent vs. 28 percent). Though it was limited by a fairly small sample of CCCU students, Railsback’s work raised doubts about Hunter’s findings.

A more recent study used CIRP data to compare religious-attendance patterns among students at both CCCU and other schools (Henderson 2003). CCCU students were far more likely to sustain their religious attendance patterns. Another found that the average college student experiences declines in church attendance, discussing religion, and prayer during their first year at school (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno 2004). The authors note, however, that attendance at four-year Protestant universities had a positive effect on religious practice. One excellent study, based on a 1996 survey of nearly 3000 students at evangelical schools, showed that students on evangelical campuses haven’t changed much from 1982 (Penning and Smidt 2002). On measures of doctrinal orthodoxy, attitudes toward family life, and attitudes toward moral/immoral behaviors like drinking, smoking, and nonmarital sex, modern students at evangelical schools show few signs of rampant secularization (Penning and Smidt 2002). Finally, analysis of the massive 150,000-student-strong

2004 NSSE reveals that religious engagement is strongest at universities with a faith-based mission and supportive campus culture (Kuh and Gonyea 2005). So the most recent data on retaining religious identity and elevated involvement patterns seems clearly positive for CCCU schools, in contrast to Hunter's earlier findings.

Against the backdrop of college as a (presumed) place of religious decline came a study in 2007 that has shaped both scholarly and public opinion. Using nationally representative data, University of Texas sociologists found that while most young adults exhibit declining religiosity, the rate of descent is actually *less* steep among college students than those who aren't enrolled, undermining the simple hypothesis that the college experience erodes religious faith (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Why? The authors suggest that several social changes have occurred to shift the impact of college on religious vitality. Most notably, the mass expansion of access to college education has reduced the share of students who come to college expecting to challenge their thinking and develop their minds. Students are more instrumental and thus tend to be less open to potential secularization. Second, the increasing specialization of large universities decreases the share of courses in which professors discuss religious themes. Third, the wide expansion of parachurch organizations on campus allows more students to find social support for their religious beliefs and identities. While college students tend to become more liberal politically, their religious patterns—while generally weak—are nevertheless stronger than those of young adults who do not progress into college. Thus there is something about the life stage itself that leads to religious disinterest, but college attendance seems to mediate this decline.

The study raises important questions that are especially relevant for Christian colleges and universities. First, if secular universities are no longer consistently unfriendly to faith, will Christian colleges have a more difficult time convincing parents and students that their higher tuition is worth the investment? And second, if college is protective against religious decline, how long does such protection last? Are graduates likely to exhibit declining religious practice after leaving Christian colleges or parachurch gatherings? Calvin College sociologist Jon Hill's (2009) study begins to answer some of these questions. Drawing upon nationally representative data from nearly 9,000 youth, he notes that students at CCCU schools are more likely to maintain their religious-attendance patterns during college than are students at public, Catholic, or mainline Protestant colleges. Interestingly, evangelical students are more likely to decline in religious attendance when they attend Catholic universities, while Catholic students display growth in attendance when they attend evangelical colleges, suggesting that the environment at evangelical schools is supportive of religious attendance. Upon reflection and considering more recent studies, then, the college experience in general is no longer thought to be toxic for faith, and evangelical schools are among the best at helping students maintain their religious practice and vitality.

Three other patterns that may support religious practices are notable. First, students at large research universities are least likely to exhibit gains in religious engagement, while students at denominational liberal-arts colleges, Greek-affiliated students, and varsity athletes are all more likely to report higher levels of religious engagement (Kuh and Gonyea 2005). Second, social-science and humanities majors are more likely to decline in religious attendance, while education majors exhibit gains (Kimball et al. 2009). Finally, married young adults are less likely to experience religious decline, although it's unclear if this is true among students who become married while still in college (Uecker et al. 2007).

Moral Behaviors

Does attendance at a Christian college or university encourage religiously prescribed behavior—such as telling the truth, avoiding nonmarital sex, or working hard in school? Ironically, we found few studies that directly answer this question. It appears there is much work to be done in this area. Studies comparing similarly religious students in both Christian and secular universities are needed, as well as studies that can specify mechanisms and studies of alumni to see if (potential) effects from college establish long-term trajectories.

One very notable qualitative study that includes a direct comparison between CCCU schools and other schools is found in *Sex and the Soul* (Freitas 2008). After interviewing over 100 students at several CCCU, Catholic, private nonreligious, and public schools, author Donna Freitas laments the “hookup culture” of casual sex that pervades every kind of college campus *except* for evangelical campuses. In fact, Freitas issues a glowing assessment of how much healthier the sexual climates are at evangelical campuses, and she specifically attributes the difference to the community of the colleges (2008, p. 175). Freitas does, however, note that there is room for improvement at evangelical schools. Specifically she finds that the students she interviewed wanted more openness for talking about sex at CCCU schools, but the very norms that helped protect them also created taboos that kept them from open discussion with faculty, student-affairs staff, and even peers (2008, p. 171). Freitas also sees problems with the “ring by Spring” culture fostered at evangelical schools, where young women especially suffer when they don’t find a husband or fiancée before graduation (2008, p. 114).

Unfortunately, beyond *Sex and the Soul*, there are few empirical studies which directly compare CCCU schools to other schools in regards to moral behaviors. There are, however, at least two arenas where colleges can *indirectly* affect moral behaviors: church attendance and family formation.

Adults who are married, have children, and frequently attend church are also more likely to behave in ways consonant with Christian teachings. Adults inhabiting the roles of spouse, parent, and churchgoer live out a set of cultural scripts that expect conservative moral behaviors (e.g. husbands shouldn’t cheat on wives, mothers shouldn’t steal, churchgoers shouldn’t gossip) within a community that reinforces conformity. The bottom line is, church attendance and family formation positively impact moral behaviors. So what does this have to do with Christian colleges and universities? Simply, Christian schools can prepare students for church and family life after college in the same way that they prepare students for work life after college. In so doing, colleges could indirectly influence a wider set of desired moral behaviors.

A study of CCCU alumni revealed that many felt their colleges didn’t actually encourage their active participation in congregational life (Parkyn 1985). Moreover, if students find supportive religious communities on campus, especially ones that tailor to their tastes and timing, they may find more traditional (i.e., “older”) congregations less attractive and miss out on the intergenerational dynamics therein. Finally, residential students, which comprise the majority of students on CCCU campuses, may find it difficult to connect with a congregation in their campus community because they are frequently away (during seasonal breaks or semesters abroad) or don’t live proximate to the church. So, while the evidence presented earlier suggests that students at Christian colleges are more likely than students at state schools to attend churches, they still may not begin to take on adult roles in a local church. The more Christian colleges can do to prepare

students for an involved church life after college, the more they will find that they have encouraged other desirable behaviors such as marital fidelity and financial integrity.

For Christian colleges and universities, supporting healthy future families for their students is about more than indirectly encouraging desirable moral behaviors. It's also an investment in the future prospects of the college. Children of alumni (especially those from intact families) are among the most likely to become future students of their parents' college. Additionally, children from intact families are more likely to grow up in church and to maintain their religious commitments as adults (Zhai et al. 2007). Sociologist Brad Wilcox (2008) has made the case that the fortunes of churches are intimately tied to maintaining a supply of healthy families. Healthy churches are likely in turn to support and supply Christian universities.

Surveys of CCCU students indicate that as freshmen, seniors, *and* alumni, they count family formation among their *most important* life goals. Burwell (1998) indicates that nearly 82% of CCCU seniors surveyed ranked raising a family as either "very important" or "essential." Notably, the life goal of raising a family ranked equally high for men and women. Clearly, Christian schools wishing to find ways to encourage and support future family life would find an interested audience among their students.

There are, of course, several thorny issues to be considered in any family "promotion" efforts. As Regnerus (2009) and others have noted, young adults wishing to prepare for future family life find little support in mainstream young-adult culture, and even Christian young adults may find parents and other adults encouraging them to put off marriage until after certain material or experiential goals have been achieved. Christian colleges seeking to launch initiatives to better prepare their students for marriage and parenthood may find resistance from parents, faculty, and students who wish to put off thinking about family formation. Christian schools would also have to think carefully about the issue of singleness and vocation ("called" to be single), an issue for which evangelicals have woefully underdeveloped theology. Related to this is the imbalanced sex ratio on many Christian college campuses. Regnerus (2009) points out some of the difficulties that come with an unbalanced sex ratio, not the least of which is that there are simply not enough devout Christian young men to serve as husbands. Considering the "ring by Spring" culture already in place at some evangelical schools (see above discussion of Freitas 2008) and the imbalanced sex ratio at most CCCU schools, thoughtfulness and sensitivity will be required of colleges courageous enough to *actively* engage with students as they wrestle with issues of dating, singleness, and preparation for positive adult relationships of all types.³

While talk of family formation may seem out of place in a report on spiritual and moral formation, we believe the issues are intimately related. Christian universities interested in promoting moral behavior among their students would do well to consider how they encourage the development of students' vision for future families.

³ There is some evidence that evangelical women who remain single into young adulthood may have difficulty finding their place in churches where marriage is highly normative; these young women may disaffiliate from evangelicalism (see Aune 2008).

Challenges and Conclusions

Today's students bring new challenges to universities wishing to encourage moral and spiritual development. Modern students are open in ways that may facilitate encounters with diverse people and ideas, stimulating crises of faith that can nurture spiritual maturation. In fact, the best recent account of young-adult spirituality claims that the values of liberal Protestantism have won the day in the hearts and minds of modern young adults (Smith and Snell 2009). Some Christian educators will welcome this news more than others.

On the other hand, today's students may be more closed to developing their minds than in the past. Expecting job training more than intellectual engagement, students are more apt to place their spiritual and moral identities in a "lockbox" to be safely stowed during their college years, leaving them unexamined and stagnant (Clydesdale 2007). Perhaps most disturbing for those wishing to promote moral and spiritual development among college students is the widespread idea among students that the college years are a time for unrestrained exploration of sensual pleasures (Smith and Snell 2009). The short-term thinking that says "What happens in college, stays in college" can severely blunt attempts to encourage investment in long-term character.

Christian colleges and universities appear to do the best job supporting students' spiritual and moral growth, but the evidence is far from conclusive, and as we noted earlier, the standard doesn't seem very high. Future studies must pay careful attention to issues of *selection* by measuring students' precollege characteristics and comparing students enrolled in Christian colleges with similar students in secular universities. Additionally, future work should be designed to specify the mechanisms involved in promoting moral and spiritual development instead of relying on gross indicators of campus culture. While campus cultures should not be reduced to interchangeable parts or a list of ingredients, thoughtful attention can be given to understanding those elements which are necessary and/or sufficient for morally supportive campus cultures to work. Finally, Christian colleges should consider how they can support the future church and family lives of their students—in addition to encouraging students' future vocational efforts. How well their alumni connect with local churches and raise their families could directly impact the health and survival of Christian universities in the future.

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