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Influence of Adolescent Religious Experiences on Faith Decisions in College

Abigail Kipp, Central Michigan University
Holly Hoffman, Central Michigan University

Abstract

This study seeks to examine the effects of early religious experiences on later decisions regarding organized religious involvement among a study population of college students at a mid-sized public state university in the Midwestern United States. This project fills a gap in the existing literature by performing an exploratory study regarding students who maintain religious participation in college, continue involvement with the church at a decreased frequency, and those who permanently cease religious involvement during the college years. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are used to examine how positive and negative religious experiences impact decisions post-high school and what overarching trends exist in this study population's experience in religious institutions. The study includes an examination of the relationship between the perception of the church as an institution and patterns of involvement.

Keywords: adolescence, high school religious experiences, religious involvement in college

Influence of Adolescent Religious Experiences on Faith Decisions in College

Many adolescents are involved, to some degree, in religious activities during their high school years. However, when they transition from high school to college, they often discontinue their religious involvement, which is a concerning issue for churches today. Often the positive and negative experiences associated with religious involvement in high school influence how this population makes decisions about religious involvement in college. Students seem to be no longer involved, have become involved in the college setting with less consistency, continued involvement during their college experience, or have become more

involved religiously while enrolled in a higher education institution. Discovering what churches as a whole are doing well in reaching the adolescent population, as well as what is being done to drive them away from being involved after transitioning to college offers valuable insight. Based on these discoveries, churches may examine their practices so that they may provide adjustments to increase the likelihood that adolescents will choose to continue or increase their religious participation once they move away to college.

Literature Review

A substantial body of knowledge relating to factors that influence religious participation decisions of adolescents and young adults currently exists. Hoge and Petrillo (1978) investigated a study population of tenth grade youth. In their research, the authors examined attitudes of high school youth towards the church. They discovered perspectives of rejection are influenced by a dislike of religious training, as well as perceiving church leaders as unapproachable, insincere, or uncertain of expressing their beliefs. In addition, they were prone to rejecting youth group involvement if they had previous unpleasant religious experiences. This study aligns with findings from Waters and Bortree (2012), as they examined what impacted college student relationships with their religious organizations and found that the responsiveness of the leaders and the demonstration of care for congregation members played a role in the development of good relationships. It was also important for church members to be engaged in conversation and activity outside of official church services. This study, however, only focused on the views of those engaged in religious organizations and what influenced their relationship and excluded those not engaged in religion (Waters and Bortree 2012).

Similarly, others have continued to explore the influences on behaviors related to religious involvements. Petts (2009) investigated factors that influence different trajectories of religious participation in young adults between 20 and 25 years of age. Family characteristics, such as religiosity, family structure, young adult relationship decisions, and past life experiences all had an influence on later religious decisions in terms of whether participation remained stable or changed. The vast majority of youth were attending religious services less than once a month on average by the age of 25 (Petts 2009).

Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) focused on different factors facing young adults. Decreases in attendance for religious activities were reported for 70% of young adults, 20% experienced decreased personal importance of religion, and 10% disaffiliated from organized religion (Uecker et al. 2007). These particular researchers did not connect attendance in higher education with decreased religious activity for a variety of reasons, including that college attendees are enrolled primarily to complete a degree, as well as the religious shifts on college campuses across time.

Uecker and colleagues (2007) also acknowledged they were still unable to adequately explain religious decline. One assertion may be the lack of suitable religious socialization in the families of origin for adolescents. This lack of socialization may lead to attrition once the grounding structure is left behind, as Petts (2009) recognized. There is a presumable possibility that churches do not focus on issues relevant to young adults or create a space for them (Uecker et al. 2007). Additionally, they found that young adults who do not attend college exhibit the highest rates of religious decline.

Petts (2009) studied the difference in declines in attendance between mainline and evangelical Protestants as well. Members of mainline Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and other Christian groups are more likely to experience a decline in participation in contrast to evangelical Protestants. This may be explained by Smith and Snell's research (2009), attributing this trend to the fact that members of mainline denominations are more likely to view church attendance less as a spiritual activity and more as a weekly routine.

In an earlier study, Smith, Faris, Denton, and Regnerus (2003) investigated four measures of the importance of religiosity to American adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, including agreement with parental religion, approval of churches, influence of churches, and financial donations to churches. This study found that a large portion of adolescents approved of the role of the church and felt that churches were supportive and displayed a positive level of influence. The results of this study, however, were based on data from 1996, which indicates that further, modern research is needed to determine how opinions have changed in the past two decades and how a young adult's view of the church as an institution affects religious participation.

Schwadel (2017, 85) studied how the context of religion that an adolescent experienced impacts the religiosity of emerging adults, and stated, "Higher education is particularly likely to lead to religious decline for mainline Protestants and those with religiously active parents." Additionally, Schwadel found increases in religiosity for college students that were raised in a household with parents that attended religious services on an infrequent basis. Religiosity increased for religiously unaffiliated college students.

Contrary to many researchers stating claims of religious involvement at the college level continually decreasing (Petts 2009; Smith and Snell 2009; Fenelon and Danielsen 2016; Schwadel 2017), Schmalzbauer (2013) found that rather than a decline in religious activities on college campuses, participation by students has remained stable and consistent over the past century due to six factors ranging from religious expansion, reinvention, revitalization of student organizations, growth of alternatives, beginnings in renewal of various options, and involvement of student affairs. Hill (2011) reported that college has only a minor impact on religious beliefs for the vast majority of emerging adults.

An important consideration in this field of study involves what factors influence the quality of the relationship between young adults and the church. Bader-Saye (2006) reported millennials are drawn to churches that are open to engaging in discussion over differing points of view and display a greater tolerance towards differences instead of adhering to a strict doctrine. This opens the door to investigate if the lack of factors influencing relationships between those who chose not to be involved in religion post high school.

Black's research (2008) supported that meaningful and deep relationships with both peers and older adults positively impact religiosity at the college level. When college students attend church and other religious activities with their peers, they are more likely to engage. In addition, religious activity outside of church completed by families during the high school years increases the chances of college students remaining involved at the college level. Mentorship, encouragement, and a supportive environment welcoming youth to contribute is vital. Brown's research (2016) further contributed the impact of relationships to higher rates of retention for emerging adults. Through intergenerational mentoring, positive relationships

with pastoral staff, and a sense of community, young adults become more engaged and active in their religion. Fostering focus groups with young adults, participants shared that “feeling a sense of belonging, witnessing the importance of fellowship or community, and feeling like the church was a ‘family’” were important factors in their lives (Brown 2016, 11).

Significant research for the present study was implemented by Fenelon and Danielsen (2016); findings regarding the relationships between religious disaffiliation and overall well-being were examined. Disaffiliation from religion is associated with a disadvantage in well-being as compared with those who do not disaffiliate or with those who were never affiliated. In addition, religious participation itself is linked with academic success and civic engagement, which constitute additional reasons to be interested in the factors influencing religious participation (Smith, et al., 2003). As such, it is important to understand the factors that influence this disaffiliation and subsequent decrease in well-being. Schmalzbauer (2013) highlighted that the college campus of today offers a wide variety of religious opportunities for college students displaying an interest. With the variety of viewpoints researchers have uncovered, we must move forward to best inform the church regarding the identification of optimal supports.

While several researchers have focused on adolescents and young adults, limited findings emphasize the current study population of college students, and it is necessary to determine if the factors discussed in this study impact college students in their decision-making processes about religious involvement. Moreover, it is important to revisit the ideas present in the findings to determine if what was found to historically impact youth and young adult views on religious participation are still relevant in modern day.

Method

This article reports on the results of a study aimed at gaining a better understanding of the high school experiences and the correspondence between religious participation choices of college students. The experiences during their high school career, as well as their interest level and participation during college are examined. Results of the study are utilized to better inform religious leaders, college support personnel, and the university as a whole of college students and their religious pasts, current interests, and involvement in religious activities. The impact those high school opportunities had on college endeavors related to religion is explored.

Participants

This study includes 340 undergraduate college students from one mid-sized public state university in the Midwestern United States. The students were pursuing a wide range of academic programs during their college experience, and one commonality among them was their enrollment in a general education course to fulfill a university program requirement. The college students varied in their current class ranking at the university, as 155 freshmen (41.1%), 155 sophomores (23.3%), 139 juniors (20.9%), 98 seniors (14.7%) participated in this study.

Demographic data collected by the Pew Research Center (2014) indicated that in the state where this university resides as a whole, 75% of individuals identify with a religion, however only 33% of those adults reported attending religious services at least once a week, and additional 35% report attending between a few times a year to one to two times a month.

These numbers are comparable to the demographic data of the United States as a whole. Additionally, 2018 enrollment data from the university indicated that 90.8% of undergraduate students were from this state, indicating the data gathered in this study can, with caution, be assumed to be representative of trends in the state as a whole (Central Michigan University 2018).

Procedure

As a graduation requirement at the university where this study took place, students are required to complete a well-rounded basic education foundation. Courses range from the arts, global experiences, science, and human development to list a few. Students enrolled in two different courses in the university program were invited to participate in the current study. Both courses are offered in the Human Development and Families Studies program at the university and are one of the options students may choose when determining their academic plan.

Upon IRB approval, the researchers attended sixteen different sections of face-to-face courses (eight sections of HDF 100: Lifespan Development and eight sections of HDF 110: Oppression: Roots and Impact on Human Development in the United States) to invite college students to share their experiences. For this study, students enrolled in online sections were not included in the sample. An original survey titled *Influence of Adolescent Religious Experiences on Faith Decision in College* consisting of twelve questions was distributed to college students interested in engaging in the research project. At the conclusion of the survey, students could offer their contact information if they were interested in completing a brief interview about their religious experiences in high school and college. With the information provided, the researchers completed six interviews to gain a deeper perspective on how these students viewed the issues presented in this study.

Data Analysis

After survey collection was complete, the researchers analyzed the data utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze quantitative data, and thematic analysis was utilized to examine qualitative data. The original number of college students invited to participate in this study was 859, and 666 of these students completed the survey (77.5%). However, 326 participants were removed from the data analysis due to their lack of involvement in religion during high school (49%), or their religious affiliation as non-Christian (3.6%).

Those indicating non-Christian religious affiliation were excluded for two reasons. The primary reason is related to the authors' intention for the study to provide insight to the Christian church in the United States as to what factors specifically related to church structure and characteristics impact adolescents as they transition to young adulthood. Secondly, the overall number of students affiliated with a non-Christian religion was low, with only 24 students (3.6%) reporting their religion as other than Christian. Specifically, six participants practiced Islam, four were Jewish, three reported their religion as Native American, and one participant each reported their religion as Agnostic, Atheist, Hebrew Israelite, Hindu, and Mormon. In addition, four participants chose the Other, however did not list the specific religion. This low representation of various religions makes drawing statistically significant

conclusions unlikely. A detailed analysis of the data from 340 target subject surveys took place, including descriptive statistics and percentages utilizing a comparative analysis.

Additionally, the open-ended responses were reviewed and divided into themes. The process of coding the data took place by making note of initial themes through the process of memoing, followed by the completion of summary statements. The authors coded text within the themes to determine emerging specific ideas regarding positive and negative religious influences.

Results

As stated previously, the responses from 340 undergraduate students were included in this study. Of the participants, 124 were freshmen (36.5%), 83 sophomores (24.4%), 76 juniors (22.4%), and 57 seniors (16.7%). When asked to share their religious affiliations, 217 of the participants stated they were Christian, with 123 of the 340 students specifically identifying as Catholic. The participants varied in their field of study and were enrolled in academic programs among six different colleges, as well as some students yet to decide their educational plan. The most common area of study of participants was Education and Human Services (25.3%), followed by Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (16.8%), Science and Engineering (16.2%), Arts and Media (15.3%), Health Professions (11.7%), and Business Administration (7.9%). An undecided plan of study was the status for 6.8% of study participants. Details of the participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Class Ranking			Area of Study		
	n	%		n	%
Freshman	124	36.5	Education/Human Services	86	25.3
Sophomore	83	24.4	Liberal Arts/Humanities	57	16.8
Junior	76	22.4	Science/Engineering	55	16.2
Senior	57	16.7	Arts/Media	52	15.3
			Health Professions	40	11.7
			Business	27	7.9
			Undecided	23	6.8

Trends

After coding the data, it was analyzed for trends to develop an understanding of what students engage in after high school for religious involvement, as well as what the overall expression of positive and negative experiences were in this study population. At every level of high school involvement, we found sharp declines in participation. For the study respondents, 44.1% had been involved in religious activities every week in high school. At the college level however, a 26.7% decrease was discovered as only 17.4% remained involved at this level. We also observed a 11.2% decrease amongst students who had been involved 1–3 times a month, with the percentage dropping from 21.8% to 10.6%. Amongst the 34.1% who

reported involvement several times a year in high school, only 23.5% maintained that level of involvement in college, a decrease of 10.6%. Finally, 48.5% reported they were no longer involved at all during their college experience. It should be noted, however, that of the group that reported not being involved at the college level, 20.6% of individuals are interested in being involved in religious activities.

It is both of interest and of concern that the greatest level of decrease was found amongst those who were most intensely involved in high school as this provides a strong indication that the experiences that they had in high school were not compelling enough to create a desire for ongoing involvement. However, this data also shows the value of the present study, as these youth are the ones that the church has the most opportunity to influence. Therefore, if there are church-related factors that encourage participation in college, churches would be well advised to be mindful of these things in order to pursue a greater level of retention for these students.

The respondents followed several timetables of religious involvement initiation. Twenty one percent of students indicated that they became involved immediately upon arrival to the college setting, 21.5% stated that they began involvement after 1–3 months, and 53.3% reported that they are no longer involved, with 3.2% of respondents not sharing a response to this item. The percentages are slightly incongruent with those stated above, although this may reflect that some students are not involved in religious activities during college, however, are still involved in their home setting. Perhaps these participants answered they are not involved in college for this item but indicated involvement in the previous item because of maintaining religious involvement at home.

The findings on the strength of experience for this population displayed that 37.1% of respondents indicated only positive religious experiences during their high school career, 41.2% reported both positive and negative experiences, 15% gave no mention of any type of experience, and 6.8% indicated only negative experiences. Overall students have experienced more positive experiences than negative experiences with regard to religious involvement in their various backgrounds.

For the purposes of this study, one question we explored was whether college students perceived their previous religious experiences as having an impact on their decisions in college focused on religion. The frequency analysis on the responses to this item ($n=340$) discovered that 65.9% indicated that they felt their previous religious experiences in high school did impact their college involvement in religion.

The investigators were also interested in examining whether a connection existed between the college participant's major and their patterns of religious involvement, as each college is markedly different in the types of skills required of students who major in one of the subject areas. To examine this, a Pearson Chi Square test was used to determine association between these two variables ($H_0: \chi^2=0$, $\chi^2_{crit}=12.59$, $p<.05$). Findings showed $\chi^2_{obs.}= 2.885$, $p=.823$, and as $\chi^2_{obs.} < \chi^2_{crit}$, we were unable to disprove the null hypothesis.

One of the main intentions of this study was to determine whether the presence of positive and negative experiences in high school religious experiences were related to the decisions made by college students regarding religious participation. To evaluate this, a variable

called Strength of Experience (SOE) was created, and was ranked from 1 to 4, with 1 being all positive experiences, 2 being both types of experiences, 3 being neither type, and 4 being only negative experiences. It was hypothesized that the value of the strength of the experience variable would be negatively correlated with the level of involvement in this population. Comparative statistics utilizing the Somers' d test of directional association ($H_0: d_{yx}=0, p<.05$), used as a directional measure, were implemented to determine whether a relationship existed between these two variables, with college participation being dependent on SOE. The test revealed the Somers' $d_{yx}=.157$ with $p=.001$. The results show a small, positive relationship between the variables with college involvement being dependent on SOE.

Examining how the previous experiences with religious activities influenced the timing of students' entrance into religious participation was another focus on the current study. It was hypothesized that lower values for SOE would be positively correlated with earlier entrance into religious participation at the college level. For this variable, respondents were able to choose from three options: 1-immediately began participation, 2-began participation after more than 1 month, or 3-no longer participating. The Somers' D test, $H_0: d_{yx}=0, p<.05$ was run to determine the association between these variables. $D_{yx}=.179, p=.008$, disproving the null hypothesis and confirming a small relationship between SOE and time of entrance into participation.

Given the assertion that previous experiences would influence decisions regarding religious involvement at the college level, it was also hypothesized that the frequency of religious involvement in high school would lead to higher frequency of involvement in college. This hypothesis was analyzed utilizing Kendall's tau-c ($H_0: \tau_c=0, p<.05$) to determine correlation. This test was selected because the variables being analyzed are ordinal, monotonic variables and because the cross-tabulation yielded a rectangular table. Running this test yielded a value of $\tau_c=.344, p=.000$. As $\tau_c>0$, the null hypothesis is disproved, showing that the frequency of participation in high school is somewhat predictive of how frequently a person will participate in college.

A final point of interest for the researchers was whether a participant's perception of the church as an institution would impact the degree of their participation in college. We hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between perception and involvement, with more positive perception leading to greater levels of involvement. To test this hypothesis a Somers' D test of directional association ($H_0: d_{yx}=0, p<.05$) was used. In this analysis, perception was the independent variable and the level of involvement in college was the dependent variable. Running the Somers' D test to confirm association between the independent and dependent variables revealed a value of $d_{yx}=.167$ and a significance level of $.004$, showing a small, positive relationship.

Themes

Qualitative analysis of the data collected throughout this study resulted in the identification of both five positive themes and eight negative themes as study respondents shared their perspectives on various topics. The survey asked college students to share their perceptions of the role of the church in American society, examples of religious experiences at the high school level, their positive and negative experiences in high school related to religion, and examples of religious experiences at the college level. Five positive themes

emerged consistently from the analysis and include a positive religious environment, church as a welcoming place, opportunities to be involved, models of living morally, and a safe environment.

Positive Religious Environment

Several college students participating in this study shared ideas about their appreciation for the positive and supportive features of their religious experiences during high school. For example, one respondent stated, “The church in which I was involved in high school provided me with a sense of community.” Another respondent described the religious experiences as “very uplifting and motivating.”

Church as a Welcoming Place

One component of religious experiences appreciated by a significant number of college students centered on the high level of warmth they felt in the church environment. As one participant stated, “My church environment was very welcoming, and it felt like my second family.” Similarly, another individual shared how he/she felt as a result of being involved at church, “Surrounded by loved ones whenever I went to church, always friendly people.”

Opportunities to be Involved

Many college students enjoyed the accessible volunteer and service opportunities available through religious involvement. One shared, “I was able to be involved in volunteerism, and work with people who care for me and shared a common goal.” Yet another student shared involvement in religion outside of the traditional church service, “In high school, I was active in church through church orchestra and youth group. These helped me build confidence by sharing experiences with others while getting out of my comfort zone. I did a lot of volunteering with the community.”

Models of Living Morally

Some student participants highlighted their religious experiences during high school and how their experiences assisted with the development of a strong moral foundation. For example, statements such as “It provided a basis for my morals.”, “I feel it helped me keep a high moral ground.”, and “It taught me good morals” provide examples of how religion positively influenced their lives.

A Safe Environment

The final theme that emerged from the analysis of positive experiences in religious activities during high school centered on the concept of safety. Several college students reflected on how the high level of safety made a significant difference for them through reassurance and support. One respondent shared, “My high school involvements provided me with a safe place to visit and spend time.” Another person explained, “During high school, I went through a hard break up and going to church made me feel safe and loved once again. It showed through faith you can overcome anything.”

The negative themes that emerged from the student responses were much more scattered and individualized. The eight main themes represented in the data include feeling judged,

forced to believe certain things, boring experiences, hypocritical actions, strict environment, challenging social or political issues, poor leadership, and a misalignment with personal beliefs.

Feeling Judged

Judgment was a term that was used commonly among student participants as they described challenges related to religious activities they experienced in high school. Stated simply, one person described church as “Very judgy, very rude, [and] self-involved.” Another participant shared frustration through this viewpoint, “The church made me feel guilty for simply being human, led me to make numerous decisions that made me miss out on experiences I now wish I had, and led me to believe/not believe things for illogical, nonsensical reasons.”

Forced to Believe Certain Things

Another negative theme that emerged from the student responses focused on being forced or pressured in different situations involving religious education or activities. One respondent stated that they did not appreciate, “Having to be forced into believing things during religious education.” Another spoke of the challenges related to pressure of donating money during high school or college and having only one path of belief, “Sometimes [it] felt that they [the church] were criticizing me for not going every week, and criticized for not tithing . . . I’m a broke college student!”

Boring Experiences

Several people commented on the lack of interest they had while attending religious activities in high school. As a result, the theme of boredom emerged as a descriptive term regarding church. One participant bluntly stated, “Church bored me to death” and another commented on the lack of interactive and engaging approaches by describing church as, “traditional, boring practices/routines.”

Hypocritical Actions

Still other ideas emerged through the analysis of student responses regarding the negative experiences they had while pursuing religious experiences. Several individuals expressed dissatisfaction with the level of hypocrisy they experienced in religious environments. One person stated, “Christian school pushes views, church is very hypocritical.” Another statement was made that parallels these views, “I have been told that if you don’t give substantial money to the church you go to hell – which seems like a greedy cash grab to me.”

Strict Environment

Several responses included ideas about the strict and traditional routines, practices, and views upheld in some religious settings. One student described high school religious experiences as “very strict, no room for failure.” Others described their perceptions and set of beliefs challenged, “The Catholic church has many strict beliefs about the LGBTQ community and pro-life vs pro-choice, that I don’t agree with and I felt shamed.”

Challenging Social or Political Issues

Negative experiences that related to current social or political issues were reported by a variety of participants in this study; for example, with regard to sexuality, one person shared, “I never felt welcome at my family’s church due to my sexuality. I always felt like religion was being forced on me.” Another comment highlights challenges related to varying political beliefs and the intersection between politics and religion, stating church as “very clique-like, some things go against political views.”

Poor Leadership

Some participants cited the types of leadership styles within religious organizations as the reason for their negative experiences. One study participant highlighted the challenges created by the leadership of the church, “I went to one church and it was a very judgmental pastor. . . I question religion now.” Another individual stated reasons for negative experiences as “pastors can be harsh at times,” and “don’t accept people from all backgrounds.”

Misalignment with Personal Beliefs

The final theme that emerged from study responses centered on individuals being challenged by religious messages not aligning with their personal beliefs. For example, one quote highlights this view, “church just didn’t match my beliefs/personality.” Another college student summarized their stance about religion as, “I was going . . . but realized my views are not in alignment with them, I don’t know how much I believe in Christianity.”

Discussion

This study both supports and expands on the previous research in this topic area. The trends present in this study population support the previous findings by Petts (2009) that the rate of religious participation among young adults is steadily decreasing. Seventy two percent of the respondents in this study reported being involved at the college level only several times a year or not at all, which marks a drastic decline from their high school participation. During their high school careers, 65.9% were involved between once a week and once a month and 100% had been involved at least to some degree. This finding is concerning for the church today, as the drastic decrease in participation indicates that the church may not be attractive enough to the current generation to keep them participating. This finding cannot be completely attributed to issues within the church, however, as some respondents included other types of religious participation in their responses, such as Catholic school and summer camps, which could be part of the reason for the drop in participation. Regardless, the percentage of college age youth who were involved in high school and who have decreased or ceased participation in religious activities in college is a concerning trend to see.

This decrease could be due to a variety of factors. Family factors such as religiosity and family structure may provide part of the answer (Petts 2009), and this study provides some evidence that college students’ previous experiences with organized religious activities may influence their decisions in college. This is shown by the small, positive relationship between the strength of a participant’s experience and their involvement in college; increased presence of negative experiences in high school was predictive of decreased participation in college. The strength of a respondent’s experience was predictive of their time of entrance into religious

activities in college if they did become involved. The presence of more negative experiences was predictive of later entrance into participation itself. It is important to note here that the majority of respondents (65.9%) self-reported that their previous experiences with organized religious activities influenced their decisions regarding involvement in college. This self-report itself indicates a need for further research to better understand the mechanisms of how these experiences influence students.

This current study provides an update to the 1996 data used in Smith, Faris, Denton, and Regnerus' study (2003) indicating that the view of the church as an institution by adolescents is largely positive. At least for this study population, the view of the church is still largely positive, as 78.7% of respondents indicated that they believe the church does everything right or does most things right with some room for improvement. Only 9.7% indicated that they felt the church does more harm than good or is unnecessary in society, and the remaining 11.6% indicated an opinion other than the options provided. There was a small, statistically significant relationship between the perception of the church and the respondents' participation in religious activities in college. The small size of this relationship, however, combined with the fact that although the perception of the church remains overwhelmingly positive while attendance continues to decrease, indicates that there are other reasons influencing this trend that need to be discovered.

This study found no difference in college participation between respondents who identified as Catholic and those who identified solely as Christian, which was surprising given the previous research by Petts (2009) that found those identifying as Catholic experienced greater declines than those identifying as Evangelical Protestants. However, part of this discrepancy may be due to the design of this study, which did not allow for distinctions between types of Christianity and did not clearly identify Catholicism as a subset of Christianity. This issue will be further discussed in the directions for future research section of this paper.

Previous research among populations ranging from high schoolers to college students identified factors such as church leadership, relationships, and openness to new ideas as factors impacting the likeliness of people in this age range to be involved in church activities (Waters and Bortree 2012; Bader-Saye 2006). Additionally, a dislike of religious training was associated with negative feelings about involvement among high schoolers (Hoge and Petrillo 1978). The current study both confirms the influence of these factors and exposes additional elements that have an impact on high school students and the decisions they make as they transition to college. Warm, supportive relationships were mentioned numerous times as a positive experience and feeling judged or unwelcomed were also prominent themes. This points to the value of monitoring and developing a warm, supportive culture within church bodies, as the role of relationships in influencing decision making is undeniable.

Limitations

It is necessary to consider the results of this study in light of the limitations present in the methodology and study population. This study only used data from students who identified as Christian or Catholic, and as such, the viewpoints and experiences of students from other religious backgrounds are not represented, although as has been mentioned, this could be considered a strength as well, due to the goals of the study. In addition, this study was

conducted at one mid-sized Midwestern university. Results may have been different if the survey was administered in a more diverse setting. One of the biggest limitations present in the research was the lack of data on gender, ethnicity, and age.

Although a thorough analysis of the data was conducted in various ways, the lack of information on these three major demographic categories served to limit what was capable of being discovered. This does, however, provide direction for future research investigating the role gender, ethnicity, and age in how students make religious participation decisions. A final limitation that deserves to be mentioned is the subjective nature of the research at hand. As the researchers were coding the short answers detailing positive and negative experiences, there was an unavoidable level of subjectivity as we chose how to categorize answers, and due to this, some responses may not be accurately represented in the final analysis as the respondents intended.

Directions for Future Research

This study provides several avenues for future study that would be beneficial for churches in the United States to be able to better understand why college students make their religious participation decisions. One of the most interesting findings of this study was the discovery of a significant percentage of college students with prior religious involvement (20.6%) are not currently involved but have an interest in being involved. The present study, however, did not have a means of gathering data on what barriers exist that keep this group of students from becoming involved. A quote from one of the students who was interviewed when asked what would make her more interested in being involved in religion at the college level may provide some initial insight into this question; “I think more outreach by the church activities.... There was nobody that really reached out to me. I definitely would [become involved], I just don’t know where to start.” This is just a starting point, however, and shows that considerable research is needed to understand what keeps college students with interest in religious involvement from being involved. Discovering answers to this question will provide valuable guidance to college ministries and churches as they engage in outreach and ministry activities.

Future research should also investigate the differences in college participation between branches of Christianity by using more exacting standards than this study was able to do. The current study only differentiated using the terms Catholic and Christian, which is not specific enough to perform detailed analysis on potential differences in participation from high school to college. By creating more descriptive categories that address divisions within the Christian church, future research may be able to find statistically significant differences in participation patterns among college students based on their previous affiliations.

This study broke ground by focusing on how the strength of a respondent’s experience impacted their decisions about religious participation in college. However, the variable used to measure this only considered whether positive and negative experiences were present and was not able to measure the relative strength and weakness of those experiences for each individual. Future research should use a Likert-type scale to allow participants to rate the strength of their experiences and then use this more detailed data to examine if the relationship between college participation and previous experiences is stronger than this current study was able to demonstrate.

A final direction for future research is found in the data that was not analyzed in this study. There were several participants who indicated that they had no prior religious involvement, yet since arriving at college, had become involved. Although this observation was interesting to the researchers, it was not considered in the present study due to the selective focus of the questions at hand. However, future investigators should investigate this population to understand better both its motivations and to gain a clearer picture of how widespread this trend is. An investigation of this nature will expand our understanding of the trends present in religious involvement among college age youth.

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