Religion and wellbeing among college students

Objective: To gain a greater understanding of the influence of religious beliefs on the general wellbeing of university students.

Methods: We surveyed students at a large, secular university to evaluate the influence of religious beliefs on general wellbeing.

Results: Of the 227 participants, there were almost equal portions of evangelicals, social Christians, agnostic/atheist and other religious groups. Religious group participation was 36%. Students reported high levels of wellbeing with no statistical difference between religious belief systems. Evangelical Christians they more often perceived themselves as: spiritual (P<0.001), accepted by God (P<0.001) and having more purpose (P=0.01). Students who identified as both evangelicals and 'saved by grace' (n=61) showed greater wellbeing (P= 0.015).

Conclusions: University students have high levels of wellbeing across all religious belief systems. Evangelical Christians showed higher levels of spirituality, acceptance by God and purpose. Those who are 'saved by grace' showed greater wellbeing than other groups combined.

Results

In total, 227 students participated and their characteristics are listed in Table 1. The participant profile appears skewed to more females, those in the senior grade level and non-Hispanics.

High School religious participation - Approximately half of the participants said that during high school they attended a religious youth group. The most common motivation to attend was to grow in their faith and social reasons (Table 2). As high school students the vast majority identified themselves as social or evangelical Christian or atheist/agnostic in religious orientation.

University religious participation and adherence - At the University about three quarters of participants, in almost equal portions, considered themselves evangelical or social Christian or agnostic/atheist with other groups having fewer adherents (Table 3). Just over a third of students said they attended a religious group at church or the University. The most common reasons to attend a religious group were to grow in, or to be obedient to, their faith (Table 3). The reasons for the reduction in attendance from high school levels included most commonly dislike of the worship service venues available or a denial of their prior religious belief (Table 3). Regarding adherence, approximately 50% of participants said they attended a religious meeting once or more a week and the same percent prayed, from several times a week to once daily. About a quarter stated they would tell others about their faith at least once monthly. Adherence was greatest among evangelical Christians (P<0.0001).

University religious participation and wellbeing - All evaluated groups had a high level of overall wellbeing (85% chose somewhat or complete agreement) with no difference between religious belief systems (P=0.21). After the Bonferroni correction, evangelical Christians showed several characteristics that might promote wellbeing in that they more often perceived themselves as: spiritual (P<0.001), accepted by God (P<0.001) and having more purpose (P=0.01) than the other belief systems. However, evangelicals bore more guilt (P<0.001) than adherents to other belief systems although it appeared mild in extent, i.e., the guilt was almost always graded as 'somewhat' indicating it probably was mild. Further, after the Bonferroni correction, for sub-groups that might demonstrate higher wellbeing, we found that students who identified as both evangelical Christian, and 'saved by grace' (n=61) showed greater wellbeing than other groups combined (P= 0.015). In addition, after the Bonferroni correction, the evangelical/saved by grace group demonstrated similar guilt ratings as other participants combined (P=0.01). Further, when we added adherence to the analysis, attending a religious group at least once a week, praying at least every day and teaching about their faith at least several times a month, we found that among this small group (n=23) there were no students with indifferent or poor wellbeing ratings and their wellbeing levels were better (P=0.015), with similar levels of guilt (P=0.11), than the other groups combined. No differences were noted between social and evangelical Christians in wellbeing (p=0.16), guilt (P=0.089), admittance into heaven (P=0.047) but the latter group attended religious services (P=<0.001) and prayed (P=0.01) more. In contrast, among the atheist/agnostic group we could not identify a series of characteristics examined in this study that predicted a greater wellbeing. Of all atheist/agnostic or humanist students (n=73 combined), 23 (32%) maintained some level of religious activity through prayer or religious service attendance. Further, of this combined group 34 (47%) indicated that they were not completely sure heaven did not exist and 5 (7%) indicated that they would be accepted into heaven at death.

Table 1: Respondent characteristics

Question	Choices	N	Percentage
Average age (years)		21	NA
Race	Caucasian	149	66%
	Asian	47	21%
	African American	12	5%
	Multiracial	9	4%
	Hispanic	6	3%
	Other	2	1%
Gender	Female	184	81%
	Male	43	19%
Grade	Senior	102	45%
	Junior	60	26%
	Sophomore	28	12%
	Graduate student	27	12%
	Freshman	10	4%
Major	Life Sciences/Allied Health	64	28%
	Business	42	19%
	Liberal Arts	33	15%
	Education	18	8%
	Psychology	16	7%
	Fine Arts	11	5%
	Earth Sciences	11	5%
	Communication/Journalism	8	4%
	Engineering	5	2%
	Public Relations	5	2%
	Sociology	5	2%
	Other	6	3%
GPA	3.6-4.0	115	51%
	3.1-3.5	82	36%
	2.6-3.0	20	9%
	2.1-2.5	5	2%
	Do not know	4	2%

Table 2: High School religious participation

Question	Responses	N	Percentage
In high school did you regularly attend religious youth activities associated with your place of worship or at school?	Yes	118	52%
	No	108	48%
If you answered YES above, why did you attend (may choose more than one)?	To learn or grow in my faith	79	67%
	My friends attended	65	55%
	To be obedient to my faith	47	40%
	My parents insisted I go	42	36%
	Just something to do	19	16%
	My girlfriend/boyfriend attended	5	4%
My view towards God in high school could be best described as:	Evangelical Christian	75	33%
	Social Christian	71	31%
	Atheist/Agnostic	51	23%
	Muslim	7	3%
	Jewish	7	3%
	Hindu	5	2%
	Humanist	5	2%
	Buddhist	4	2%
	Mormon	1	0%

Table 3: University religious participation and adherence

Question	Responses	N	Percentage
Do you currently regularly attend religious activities associated with your place of worship or the University?	Yes	81	36%
	No	146	64%
If you answered YES above, why do you attend (may choose more than one)?	To learn or grow in my faith	69	85%
	To be obedient to my faith	37	46%
	My friends attend	22	27%
	My girlfriend/boyfriend attends	5	6%
	Just something to do	5	6%
	My parents insist I go	2	2%
My current view towards God can be best described as:	Evangelical Christian	75	33%
	Atheist/Agnostic	59	26%
	Social Christian	54	24%
	Humanist	14	6%
	Hindu	7	3%
	Buddhist	6	3%
	Muslim	5	2%
	Jewish	3	1%
	No view	1	0%
	Uncertain	1	0%
If you attended in high school, but do not in college, why did you stop?	I still believe the tenets of my faith but do not like the worship options currently available to me	22	40%
	I no longer believe the tenets of that faith	16	29%
	I have no time to attend	8	15%
	Plan to attend, searching for right group	3	5%
	My friends are within other social/fraternal or academic groups	2	4%
	Went before to please parents	1	2%
	Got out of the habit	1	2%