

The Effects of Higher Education and Religiosity

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Background

The goal of this research project was to explore how nurturing the college experience is to an individual's faith, as well as define the primary causes of faith development or faith loss in the college environment in order to determine if any potential action could be taken to improve student's spiritual and religious experiences on campus. In order to do this, we aimed our research toward understanding the complex, personal interaction between the social self and the private self that differentiates and appropriates various essences of being. Our research stressed the importance of understanding social interactions between students and how these interactions come to affect the construction of independent, subjective selves. We were also interested in examining the phenomena of de-institutionalization, or, the tendency of individuals to stray away from institutionalized religion once they enter college and lean towards more personal, spiritual religious practices.

Methods

Religiosity, spirituality, and faith development are the variables of key interest in this study. Data were collected through five informal structured interviews with randomly selected UW-Stout students. The study used qualitative methods to answer these questions:

1. What aspects of the college experience (i.e. social influences, the accumulation of higher knowledge, exposure to diverse beliefs and values...) affect an individual's faith development, religious or spiritual practices, and overall religiosity?
2. How important is personal faith and spirituality in college life?



Results: Individualism and Conformity

This study suggests that social integration on college campus is at least somewhat dependent on an individual's capacity to conform to societal norms and behaviors. While the college experience promotes autonomy and quests for individuality, the results of such quests are generally hidden from individual's social interactions in order to avoid potential alienation and stigmatization from peers. In addressing students propensity to conform, one student stated, "When I got here I realized that I am going to spend the next four or so years here, so I guess, as immature as it sounds, I just tried to make myself somewhat marketable." In order to 'fit-in', individuals tend to conform to societal norms and expectations. The incongruence of beliefs and behaviors in religious individuals exemplifies integration and solidarity based on a sort of group-think, rather than a melting together of 'individual' individuals. Faced with a mechanical type of solidarity, students become insecure in their beliefs, leading to a general outward conformance to pre-conceived notions of what is expected of each individual's behavior within the college environment.

Results: Managing Stigma

In our interviews, multiple students expressed a fear of stigmatization. The social threat of stigmatization appears to be enough to cause one to abandon their outward religious and spiritual practices in order to avoid alienation. One student stated, "I think that I sensed a certain discrimination against such passions like religion...Like you're not supposed to care about anything like that in order to fully participate in the social arena." No students reported being stigmatized openly, but instead expressed anxiety over anticipatory stigmatization. These results lead us to question what it is about the institution of higher education that fosters such fears, which eventually lead us to the belief that it was mainly a social phenomena. The fear of being socially stigmatized leads students to suppress their beliefs and conform to mainstream values held and internalized by the general populace. This form of managing stigma is detrimental to fostering individual beliefs and subjectivities which are crucial in the overall construction and expression of one's being.

Implications

Our research illustrates that faith becomes less important and prevalent in guiding individual's behavior in everyday life due to the fear of stigmatization and alienation. Students learn to express themselves through the expected avenues presented to them by the popular culture. In order to "fit in" with the majority, students are expected to acquiesce with certain beliefs and values that are popularly held and disseminated through social interactions. Autonomy is typically surrendered in order to surround oneself with whatever company students find themselves in, rather than utilized to express individuality. We believe that in order to counter this submission of individual subjectivity it is crucial that religious students have more visible platforms and social settings where they are able to comfortably express their own constructed beliefs. Religious clubs and organizations on campus are a fantastic starting point for these students as they foster faith development and provide a 'safe' place for individual expression.